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BECAUSE OF RECENT EVENTS, MY BELOVED LITTLE SISTER SASAMI-SAN HAS FALLEN INTO **DEPRESSION**, AND HAS BECOME AN EVEN WORSE HIKIKOMORI. SHE JUST DOESN'T COME OUT OF HER ROOM ANYMORE.

I'VE TRIED EVERYTHING BUT I'M COMPLETELY HOPELESS, SO LIKE ALWAYS I'VE COME TO THE HOME OF THE YAGAMI SISTERS TO ASK FOR A FEW **WORDS OF WISDOM**.

● REC

INTERVIEW WITH THE  
YAGAMI SISTERS



## THE YOUNGEST SISTER: TAMA



SORRY FOR INTRUDING~~.

SO, I CAME OVER HERE TO ASK IF YOU ALL HAVE ANY GOOD IDEA ON HOW TO GET SASAMI-SAN TO CHEER UP, BUT... OH MY, IS TAMA-SAN THE ONLY ONE HERE?

"WAI!! WAI!!~~! **TAMA IS HERE!** IT'S RARE TO SEE PAPARIN COME OVER! TAMA IS SURPRISED! PAPARIN, WANT TO GET UNDER THE KOTATSU? (1)"

NO THANKS. I'M NOT GOING TO BE HERE TOO LONG.

"**HOWAWAWA...** REALLY? BUT IT'S SO WARM. UMM, YOU WANT TO CHEER MAMARIN UP, RIGHT? HMMM... THAT'S RIGHT. A BAD PERSON DID MEAN THINGS TO MAMARIN AND SHE'S BEEN SO SAD AFTER THAT. TAMA IS WORRIED TOO.

I KNOW! TAMA WILL GIVE MAMARIN A SHOULDER RUB! TAMA IS REALLY GOOD AT THOSE!

TAMA TRIED ONCE AT SCHOOL AND THERE WAS A BIG **CRACK AND MR. PRINCIPAL STOPPED MOVING!"**

SASAMI-SAN IS PRETTY FRAIL, SO I DON'T THINK SHE WOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE ALL OF TAMA-SAN'S LOVE.

ALSO, TAMA-SAN, YOUR GOOD INTENTIONS ALWAYS END BADLY DON'T THEY?

"**HMMPH!** TAMA DIDN'T MEAN TO DO ANYTHING BAD! AH, PAPARIN, WANT AN ORANGE? THEY'RE REALLY TASTY! AH, IF MAMARIN EATS SOMETHING SWEET I'M SURE SHE'LL CHEER UP!

OKAAY, TAMA WILL TRY HARD AND **TURN MAMARIN'S HOUSE INTO A CANDY PALACE!"**

THAT KIND OF ALTERATION WOULD BE **PRETTY TRAUMATIC** FOR SASAMI-SAN, SO I'D APPRECIATE IT IF YOU DIDN'T...

(1) A HEATED LOW TABLE.

## THE MIDDLE SISTER, KAGAMI



AH, THERE SHE IS. GOOD AFTERNOON, KAGAMI-SAN.

"WHY IS SENSEI IN OUR HOUSE...?"

PLEASE DON'T LOOK SO DISAPPOINTED. AREN'T YOU EXCITED?

"SENSEI SHOULD JUST GO AND DIE. WHEN I BECOME AN INFLUENTIAL POLITICIAN IN THE FUTURE, I'LL MAKE BEING GROSS A CRIME PUNISHABLE BY DEATH."

WHAT A STRANGE DICTATORSHIP THAT WOULD BE.

BUT THE SCARIEST THING IS THAT THE YAGAMI SISTERS PROBABLY COULD ACTUALLY MAKE THAT HAPPEN... WELL, EITHER WAY, I'M NOT GROSS AT ALL, SO I'D BE FINE.

"WHERE IS THAT CONFIDENCE COMING FROM...? ANYWAYS, ABOUT SASAMI-SAN... I HAVE DETERMINED THAT THIS SITUATION IS CERTAINLY CAUSE FOR CONCERN. SASAMI-SAN POSSESSES THE POWER OF THE SUPREME GOD, WHICH FORMS THE CORE OF THIS WORLD, AND SO HER EMOTIONS ARE INTIMATELY TIED WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL STATE OF THE WORLD. EVIL GODS WILL TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HER WEAKNESS TO RUN WILD AND UNCHECKED, WHILE OTHER GODS WILL TRY TO CHEER HER UP AND CREATE ABSURD IRREGULARITIES."

WELL, LATELY, THAT'S PRETTY MUCH EXACTLY HOW THE WORLD HAS BEEN.

BY THE WAY, KAGAMI-SAN... WHAT ARE YOU COOKING RIGHT NOW? IT'S A PRETTY STRANGE TIME TO BE MAKING LUNCH.

"WELL, I WAS THINKING THAT I WOULD GO VISIT SASAMI-SAN RIGHT NOW, AND DIDN'T WANT TO GO EMPTY-HANDED...

ANYWAYS, I AM PREPARING SOME RICE PORRIDGE AND EGGNOG FOR HER."

YOU MAKE IT SOUND LIKE SASAMI-SAN HAS A COLD OR SOMETHING...

KAGAMI-SAN IS AIRHEADED SOMETIMES IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED WAYS.





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## THE ELDEST SISTER: TSURUGI



THAT LEAVES TSURUGI-SENSEI...

AH, THERE SHE IS.

TSURUGI-SENSEI, WHY ARE YOU ON THE ROOF OF THE BUILDING? I HAD TO LOOK ALL OVER FOR YOU.

"EHEHE, SORRY. THE WEATHER WAS NICE, SO I THOUGHT I'D GO AND ENJOY THE SUN ☆.

KAMIOMI-ONIICHAN, DID YOU WANT SOMETHING FROM ME?"

WAIT A SECOND... WHO IN THE WORLD ARE YOU?!

"? I'M YAGAMI TSURUGI. KAMIOMI-ONIICHAN, YOU'RE SO STRANGE!

HEY HEY, ONIICHAN, YOU SHOULD COME OVER HERE AND BASK IN THE SUN A BIT TOO ☆! ALL YOUR STRESS WILL JUST FLOAT AWAY, EHEHE...☆"

AHH, RIGHT, YOU STILL HAVE THAT BUG OF YOURS, TSURUGI-SENSEI... I'M JUST SO USED TO YOU ACTING LIKE SOME MIDDLE-AGED MAN THAT WHEN YOU BEHAVE SO INNOCENTLY LIKE THIS IT JUST REALLY GROSSES ME OUT...

"KAGAMI-CHAN EXPLAINED THIS TO ME, BUT I DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND... DID I REALLY HAVE THAT CREEPY OF A PERSONALITY? BUT, PLEASE BELIEVE ME, KAMIOMI-ONIICHAN... I NEVER TALK BAD ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE AND I DON'T DRINK. I'M JUST A NORMAL GIRL ☆. AH, THE SUN IS SO PRETTY

THAT I'M CRYING... EHEHE."

I THOUGHT I'D ASK YOU FOR ADVICE ABOUT SASAMI-SAN... BUT IF YOU'RE LIKE THIS, THAT MIGHT BE RATHER TOUGH... UMM, PLEASE GET BETTER SOON.

"IT'S NOT LIKE I'M SICK OR ANYTHING. KAMIOMI-ONIICHAN, YOU'RE SO STRANGE SOMETIMES!"

ALSO, I'D APPRECIATE IT IF YOU STOPPED CALLING ME "KAMIOMI-ONIICHAN"...

SASAMI-SAAAN~~

SORRY FOR LEAVING YOU HOME ALONE. YOUR ONIICHAN IS BACK NOW, OKAY~~?

COME ON, OPEN THE DOOR AND GIVE YOUR ONIICHAN A BIG WELCOME-HOME KISS!

I JUST VISITED THE YAGAMI SISTERS, AND THEY'RE ALL WORRIED ABOUT YOU TOO.

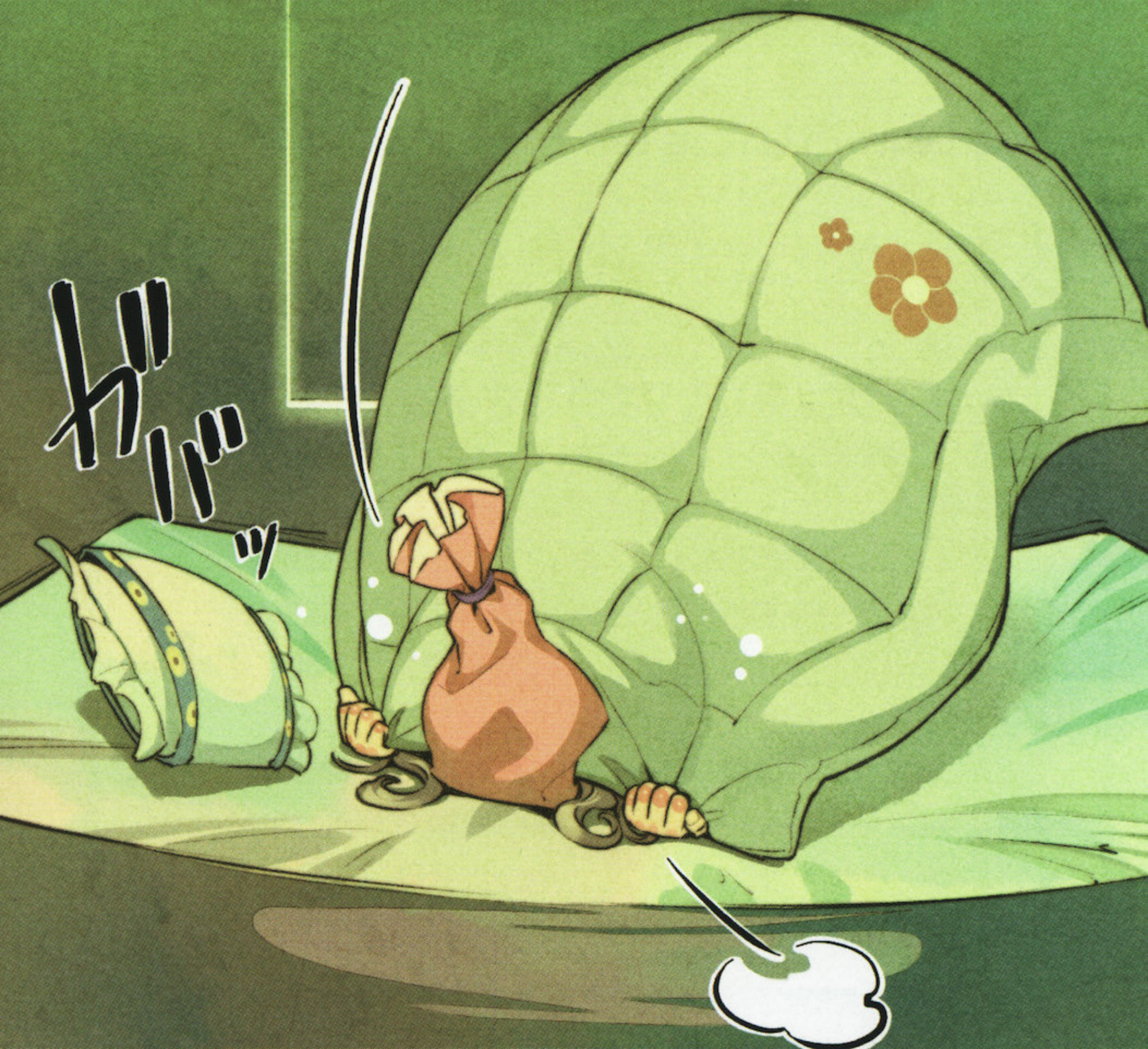
YOU'RE GOING TO BE A SECOND-YEAR STUDENT SOON, RIGHT?

DON'T JUST STAY THERE FOREVER WITH THAT GLOOMY EXPRESSION.

COME OUTSIDE AND SMILE A BIT!

YOUR ONIICHAN WILL BE THERE SUPPORTING YOU!

"...JUST LEAVE ME ALONE, DAMMIT..."



CURSED BE YOU ALL.  
TSUKUYOMI SASAMI.



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**PART 1: Ama-no-Iwato<sup>1</sup>**

**Chapter 1: Hikikomori<sup>2</sup> --> Siege Master**

**To those who plan to break into my room:**

**Cursed be you all.**

**- Tsukuyomi Sasami.**

@@@@@

“Alright then.”

I had just finished pasting a sign to the wooden door in my entranceway which read **To those who plan to break into my room: Cursed be you all. – Tsukuyomi Sasami.** I stepped back satisfied and admired my handiwork.

*What are you supposed to be, a pharaoh or something?!* I could almost hear the entire country yelling that at me. But yeah, I guess I was.

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<sup>1</sup> The famous cave in which Amaterasu hid (thus plunging the world into darkness) before eventually getting lured out by her own reflection.

<sup>2</sup> I’m only footnoting this once per volume. A hikikomori is a shut-in – someone who refuses to come out of their room.

The pharaohs of Egypt received their power through divine right similar to how the Tsukuyomi miko received the power of the Supreme God through incest. We were quite similar.

“The other gods want to be on my good side so they’ll just go ahead and try to eliminate unwanted visitors, just like so many grave-robbers and archaeologists who tried to steal from the pyramids were done in by the pharaoh’s curse. Ufufu.”

I let out an ominous laugh.

“Now... nobody can come into my room.”

As I muttered to myself, I slowly shut my door... and went back into my room.

I had not only my bed, which was covered with stuffed animals, but also my laptop, a desk lamp, manga, magazines, novels, a portable gaming system, and an assortment of sweets for when I got hungry. I was ready.

“I’m not a hikikomori<sup>2</sup> anymore. Now I’m a siege master.”

I declared that to my stuffed animals as if I was the dictator of this small world and they were my loyal subjects.

“We must hold the castle.”

In other words, this was *war*.

“I will not allow *anybody* to come into this room.”

For example, not even my brother, who loves me more than he does anybody else in the world.

Or even the Yagami sisters, who support, guide, and protect me.

*“Sasami-sama! Why would you want to start such a reckless siege?!”*

I picked up the most recent addition to my collection – the slightly bloodstained stuffed bunny which was filled with memories from my time shopping with my mother – and moved it around, pretending like it was talking back to me.

*“There’s no way you can win! No matter what method your brother uses, he’ll find a way to get into this room just so he can see or smell you! Also, the Yagami sisters are high-level gods, so no matter how much of the power of the Supreme God you use, there’s a big chance they’ll break through!”*

“There’s no need for panic, Usa-chan.”<sup>3</sup>

I sat majestically on my knees atop my bed and spoke.

“My brother might be a stubborn pervert and the Yagami sisters might be powerful, but by my calculations this should be a toss-up. After all, this time I’m actually trying hard to stop them, and I’m not going to hold back on the power of the Supreme God. “

*“Ohh, at last..>!”*

*“Sasami-sama always says she’ll try harder tomorrow, or she hasn’t shown us what she’s like if she gets serious, but now she’s finally getting her lazy butt into gear...!”*

All my stuffed animals cheered for me and stuff.

“Okay.”

I crossed my arms and lifted up my bottle of iced tea in celebration of my newfound motivation.

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<sup>3</sup> Usagi is the Japanese word for “bunny.”

“To our victory! And to a quiet spring break!”

Sa, Sa, Mi! Sa, Sa, Mi!

I nodded as I ecstatically listened to the cheers of approval ringing around me (of course, all of this was in my imagination).

Indeed.

I was planning to do absolutely nothing this spring break.

I would just wrap myself up in my futon, laze around, and just eat and sleep.

“I won’t let anybody disturb me.”

Something sad had happened the other day.

My mother had twisted the logic of this world and returned from the dead... and because I was weak and foolish, I couldn’t do anything but betray her trust and hopes.

After that, I couldn’t take a step outside my room.

The minute I did, I would get attacked by awful waves of nausea.

But... because of that, I decided to take a small break.

I didn't intend to lock myself in my room forever.

I wouldn't be weathering this siege until the end of time.

Once I rested my mind and body, and once I came to terms with these ceaseless, depressing thoughts, I would try hard again.

And conveniently, we were in the middle of spring break anyway.

But, my brother and the Yagami sisters didn't seem to understand my position and just tried to butt in... honestly, I didn't need them.

I was still in an unstable state of mind. If I met them face to face, I really couldn't predict what I would do.

I could only see us hurting each other, tiring each other out, and the entire situation just devolving into chaos.

So, I would avoid them.

I would shut myself in, even if I had to force the issue.

I was grateful for their kindness, but right now, it felt more like unnecessary meddling.

“Also...”

I looked down at my body and sighed.

There was one particular *irregularity* there.

If they saw me like this, they’d probably raise a huge fuss about it. So, I wouldn’t see anybody.

“I definitely won’t go outside. I won’t talk with anybody. I won’t do anything.”

I pulled my futon over my head and also put on my Oniichan Surveillance Tool. It had been a while since I’ve used this thing... I felt a twinge of nostalgia.

This auxiliary tool took advantage of the unphysical nature of the gods and allowed me to look down on the earth from a god’s point of view, all so I could see what my brother was doing.

“Even if it kills me, I won’t try hard.”

I turned on the Oniichan Surveillance Tool and felt the scenery around me change.





## Chapter 2: Winter (Front Half)

I saw a world colored silver.

Spring break happened in March... but even so, it was rare to see such large amounts of snow in this area.

You could almost say it was unnatural.

The Yagami sisters were walking along in that silver world where everything was made hazy by the accumulating snow.

The youngest Yagami sister, Tama, was twirling around without an umbrella while going, “waaii~~ waaii~~.” But then, she glanced up in *my direction*.

“.....?”

Tama cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes like some kind of hoodlum, staring up at me.

“Is something wrong, Tama?”

Kagami was only wearing her school uniform despite the fact it was snowing... at any rate, she sent Tama a puzzled look.

“Mmm, might be just Tama’s imagination.” Tama seemed a bit troubled, but then she opened her mouth up wide and stuck out her tongue, starting to catch the falling snow. Not very hygienic, that...

“Stop that. That’s filthy.”

Kagami narrowed her eyes at her little sister’s strange behavior and scolded her, acting quite like an older sister.

“Also, pay attention to where you are walking. I suppose there will not be many cars on the streets with the weather like this... but you’ll become nothing but a huge eyesore if you start wandering into the middle of the road with that huge, obstructive body of yours.”

Kagami poked her head out from her Japanese-print umbrella and looked up at the sky, which continued to endlessly send down snow.

“But, this is quite awful weather... why are we getting this kind of weather here and in this season? Something feels quite unnatural about all of this... it’s possible this is the workings of an alteration. Perhaps it’s just a spot of unnatural weather though... but maybe...”

“Funyaa.” Kagami seemed a bit tired after saying that much out loud, and she yawned.

“Sasami-san possesses the power of the Supreme God, and she is quite depressed right now, so it’s possible her state is having an influence on the world. According to legend, when the Sun Goddess Amaterasu fell into depression, she shut herself in the Ama-no-Iwato, and during that time, the world was plunged into darkness... it became winter. Amaterasu had that kind of disposition, so in other words... gfahh?!”

Tama’s snowball hit Kagami smack dab in the middle of the face, breaking her out of her serious thoughts.

“Kyahahaha~~”

Tama let out a triumphant, innocent smile as she began to roll up another snowball with her mittened hands.

“Kagami-nee worries way too much~~! It’s snow! Tama has never seen this much snow except on the TV! Let’s have a snowball fight! And then, Tama wants to make a snowman!”

Tama held her two hands in front of her looking at the snow gathering and melting in her hands like she had found some treasure.

“Tama loves the snow! It’s cold and makes all the warm things go away, but it’s pretty! Tama doesn’t think it’s good if it snows every day, but it’s nice sometimes! It’s nice when it piles up! Nature is so great... just like when the world turned all into chocolate once, it’s like the entire world is made of shaved ice now!”

Tama continued to spout out nonsensical things, before she suddenly stood stiff as a rod.

“Ah.... fuwaah...”

She suddenly put her hand to her mouth, and her shoulders began to tremble.

“Sneeze!”

“... Eh? What was that just now?”

“Sneeze! Sneeze!”

“T-Tama, your sneezes literally sound like the word ‘sneeze’? Normally sneezes sound like ‘achoo’ or something similar to that, do they not...?”

“Hm? Tama doesn’t say anything like that... hnn... hah... sneeze!”

“Funaa~~...”

Kagami’s frigid expression melted like snow into a gentle smile, and she suddenly seemed enraptured by her little sister as Tama wiped off the snot which now began to dribble from her nose.

“When you sneeze, you sound almost like an animal... it’s quite wonderful... it’s as if I’ve found a strange creature... suddenly Tama seems a lot cuter...”

“? Tama is cute? Ehehe... kyahh?!”

Kagami held a snowball with both hands and began to fiercely hurl them at her little sister.

“More! Sneeze more, Tama! Fall prey to all these snowballs, catch a cold, and then cry out in that cute voice again!”

“Ow! Ow owow?! Snowballs hurt more than Tama thought! Kagami-nee is really strong so stop throwing those snowballs so hard! Remember Pearl Harbor!”

As the two sisters played, someone crept up behind them...

-

“Ufufu. You two look like you’re having lots of fun together~~.”

-

It was a pretty girl who looked like she came straight out of a kid’s anime. She spoke in a kind, pleasant voice.

She sounded like a princess from a fairy tale.

“.....” “.....”

Kagami and Tama stopped kyakya-ufufu-ing all over the place and looked at the person standing behind them. Kagami had a deathly unpleasant look on her face whereas Tama seemed a bit at a loss.

It was the eldest Yagami sister, Tsurugi.

But she was acting strange.

This midget teacher’s trademark was acting like a sketchy middle-aged man while looking like a small kid... but right now she was completely acting like a child.

She tottered back and forth while she walked, and the normal hint of deliberate mischievousness was missing from her face. She was bundled up warm and her breath turned white in front of her. She honestly seemed like a puppy you'd just want to protect.

Tsurugi didn't seem to mind the suspicious looks she was getting from her sisters and instead just looked at the snow with her eyes glittering. "Snow is kind... it sucks in and makes everything go away... like hatred..." she began to mumble.

Tama seemed a bit frightened as she turned towards Kagami with teary eyes.

"U-Umm, Kagami-nee..."

"Don't mind her, Tama. I would like to believe this is a passing illness... so let's leave her be."

Kagami looked a bit unsettled as she reached out and pulled on her older sister's cheeks, almost as if testing whether or not she was real.

"Neesan has been strange ever since she followed the Ame-no-Murakumo back from the Underworld... perhaps something went wrong when she revived in this plane, or maybe something happened while she was trapped in the Underworld...?"

"I-Is Tsurugi-nee broken? Maybe she'll get fixed if Tama hits her?"

“I’m not quite sure what the cause of this bug in her programming is, so we should refrain from shocking her in any way until we diagnose the problem. It’s not like she’s causing harm to anyone other than being annoying so we should just watch her for the moment.”

Kagami let out a deep sigh and quickly began to walk.

“More importantly... we have to resolve the Sasami-san issue right now. There are still many details I am not aware of... so for now I’ve invited sensei to a family restaurant, and we will talk over it there.”

Kagami pointed to a family restaurant sign which now was visible in front of them. It seemed the restaurant was still open in the middle of all this snow.

Tama and Tsuguri both snuggled up to Kagami.

“Tama is hungry~~. Hey, Kagami-nee, Tama wants to eat a hamburger!”

“Kagami-chan, I want some omelette rice!”

“Shut up...”

Kagami cruelly shook off her two sisters and rapidly walked in a straight line towards the restaurant.

“For now, I would like to find a warm place to rest. If I accidentally fall asleep out here, I will just end up freezing to death, and there’s nothing more troublesome to me than not being able to indulge in my own lethargy.”

@@@@@

There was so much snow falling that it was actually piling up outside, so it was no surprise that there were few customers in the restaurant.

Her cheeks a bit flushed at the artificial warmth coming from the heater, Kagami brushed off the snow from Tama’s hair and clothes while the youngest Yagami sister made a racket all over the place.

“Welcome! Table for three?”

Kagami looked at the waitress who had come to greet them and spoke curtly.

“My name is Yagami, and I am here for a meeting. With sensei... umm, a man named Tsukuyomi, who should have arrived already. He’s a suspicious-looking character who is always covering his face...”

“Over here~~.”

Ah, looks like the waitress understood.

The waitress began leading the sisters through the restaurant with her best waitress smile on her face. Tama smiled widely at all the nice smells floating through the air and began to talk loudly.

“Howawawa... it’s so waaaarm~~. It’s too cold outside, and Tama thought she would catch a cold... snow is pretty scary!”

“You should have just taken an umbrella. I offered you one, but you were set on ‘making friends with the snow’ or some ridiculous thing like that. Also, stop making such a fuss in the middle of the restaurant, please.”

“Kagami-nee is always complaining~~. Tama’s ears are about to fall off~~. Ah, there he is! Kagami-nee, over here over here! It’s paparin!!”

Tama seemed to completely ignore Kagami’s instructions to stop raising a fuss and waved both her hands frantically.

She was looking at... a seat in the smoking section, and the same seat that the waitress was now pointing towards.

The seat was shrouded in gray smoke, with my brother in the middle of it all. He was sprawled out over the table as if completely dead.

Kagami walked up to the table. “Uwah, he’s dead,” she spat out with a displeased look on her face.

There was an ashtray next to my brother, and it was filled with a mountain of cigarette butts.

“S-Sensei? Are you okay?”

My brother looked so worn down that even Kagami seemed genuinely worried.

Kagami shook my brother by the shoulder, and he began to groan with his face still flat on the table.

“... It’s been thirty-four hours since I’ve talked with Sasami-san... it’s been seventy-six hours since I’ve touched Sasami-san... it’s been one hundred and twenty-seven hours since I’ve taken a bath with Sasami-san... Sasami-san... Sasami-san...”

It was like watching a drug addict going through withdrawal.

“Uwah...”

Kagami seemed completely repulsed by my brother. At that point, my brother seemed to finally notice that he wasn’t alone, and he slowly raised his head (still managing to hide his face with both his hands) and gazed at Kagami.

“Sasami... san... Sasami-san... Sasami-san...?”

“U-Uhh... unfortunately, I am not Sasami-san.”

Kagami and I had similar physiques, so my brother seemed to be hallucinating that I was there. He suddenly leaped up... and enveloped Kagami with a hug!

“Sasami-san! I wanted to see you so bad!”

“Gyah?!”

“Sasamisansasamisansasamisan! Sasami-san would never throw her poor oniichan away, would she?! A-Aaaa... this is Sasami-san’s smell, Sasami-san’s warmth, the feel of Sasami-san’s skin... Sasami-san I love you! I love you!”

“Gyah!! Gyah!! Gyah!!”

Held in my brother’s death grip, Kagami tried desperately to push him off but to no avail.

Seeing her sister like that, Tama put one hand on her hip and pointed with the other, a smug look on her face.

“See? See~~? Kagami-nee... you shouldn’t make such a fuss in the middle of the restaurant, right? Right~~? And you’re the one who scolded Tama, hmph! Kagami-nee, you’re such a bad girl! Ehehe~~.”

“Stop being an idiot and he-... help me!”

Kagami ruthlessly brought her elbow down on my brother’s head and then backed away, shaking as if she had just met an axe murderer in a dark alleyway.

“S-Sensei... y-you idiot...”

She was even tearing up a bit.

“Tama will sit next to Paparin!” Tama shouted right next to Kagami and then plopped herself down in her seat. Tsurugi had already sat down in the seat opposite my brother and was gazing at a menu.

Everyone was just doing their own thing, weren’t they...?

Kagami drooped her shoulders before going up to Tama and beginning to take off her coat for her.

“You don’t have to wear all this heavy clothing indoors, right? The restaurant is heated too, so you might feel too warm in this. Also, your table manners are still quite awful, so you might get this dirty... neesan, you can handle your clothes by yourself, right?”

“Ufufu, of course!”

Tsurugi began to take her clothes off like it was the most natural thing in the world. And by her clothes, I meant *all* her clothes.

It wasn't just her coat... Tsurugi was also casting off all the things that you really should be wearing to be a functional member of polite society.

She was left *topless*.

"Hey you! Stop that!"

Kagami had been preoccupied with Tama, but now she ran over to Tsurugi and smacked her in the head.

"I tell you so often to stop doing things that will get you arrested! Also, you're supposed to be bugging out right now, so I let down my guard, but... why is it that your perverted side is still fully intact?!"

"Kagami-chan... I have been thinking about this. I feel that everyone has one important part of themselves that defines their very being. For me, that part is probably the perverted part..."

"Neesan, that goes past the realm of 'unfortunate' and into the realm of 'pitiful'..."

“... Anyways, shall we order something? Kagami-san... please sit down as well...”

All the noise seemed to have brought my brother back to his senses, and he called out weakly to Kagami.

“Yaay~~.”

Tama opened a menu with her usual childlike innocence, and then began tugging on my brother’s clothes.

“Paparin, what’s this word?”

“Ah, that one’s ‘clam.’ And this is ‘flounder.’ And here you have ‘abalone.’”

“Funyaa.”

Kagami was applying a wet towel to her forehead, cooling herself down, before opening a menu herself and beginning to read.

“It’s quite pleasant to not have to cook myself, but for some reason it also makes me feel slightly lonely...”

“Paparin paparin! Tama wants hamburger! The hamburger is Tama’s! Ham Tama!”

“Please calm down, Tama-san. Ah, I think the kid’s meal comes with hamburger and also a toy. How about going with that one?”

“Howawawa... Tama wants that toy... but Paparin, for some reason when Tama orders a kid’s meal the waitress people tell Tama she’s an adult and don’t let her...”

Well, that’s not surprising.

“Tama-chan, I’ll order the kid’s meal for you.”

Tsurugi gave Tama a kind smile.

“But in return, order the omelette rice for me, okay? Deal? And then we can switch. I look like an elementary schooler after all, so they’ll probably let me order the kid’s meal.”

This was strange. In the past, Tsurugi had always gotten angry when people treated her like a child...

@@@@@

Eventually, everyone ordered what they wanted.

“Well then, allow me to summarize the current situation.”

Kagami teetered sleepily from side to side as she got the conversation rolling.

“Right now, we can broadly separate our current problems into two main issues.”

Kagami held up two fingers, as if she was giving the peace sign.

“Of course, there’s the possibility that these two issues are connected and originate from the same source, but let’s shelve that thought for now. First, there’s the problem I do not really care much about right now: why neesan’s programming seems to be bugging out.”

“Me?”

Tsurugi sipped at her cold water and cutely cocked her head to the side.

After that, she began wriggling her body around as if struggling against something.

“Hnngh, Kagami-chan... you’re still saying I’m broken or bugging out or things like that? My personality has always been like this, hasn’t it?”

“I will just ignore her annoying questions for the time being. In any case, allow me to make a few conjectures... it is possible that neesan faltered in some way when she returned to this plane from the Underworld, and some type of disorder emerged in her psyche. Also, there is the possibility that the Tsukuyomi priestess polluted and distorted her psyche in some way...”

Kagami grumbled as she looked at her sister who was just acting slightly *off*. She had a bit of worry in her eyes.

“At any rate, I am convinced that neesan is like this because of the events from the other day. It’s like she has switched places with someone else, or more like, she has lost her memories... or that she has regressed to a childlike state... that is what it feels like, at least.”

“Was Tsurugi-sensei like this in the past?”

My brother asked that with a confused look on his face, but Kagami shook her head.

“I do not know. Both Tama and I have only known neesan for a few years... what things were like before then are a complete mystery.”

Kagami seemed a bit annoyed at the situation.

“I did ask her about this, and it seems that neesan has retained all her memories and her personality, but only from the time when she was the Supreme God Amaterasu. That is why I said this feels almost like memory loss. It’s almost as if the majority of her memories have *completely vanished*.”

Memory loss.

This was the Tsurugi from a long time ago... from before she had rescued Kagami from that evil organization, from before she had made Tama to serve as a god of the next generation, from before she had christened the three of them the Yagami sisters.

“I see...”

“I’m going to go grab some drinks~~.” Tsurugi probably headed off to the drink counter since she couldn’t really contribute much to this conversation. My brother watched her leave with strong emotions in his eyes and began to mutter.

“I see... Tsurugi-sensei was that innocent back then... it feels a bit strange since I’m too used to Tsurugi acting like a sketchy middle-aged man, but she seems quite harmless like this, or maybe more like just a normal, cute girl.”

“Well, in truth she’s an old woman who has lived for a very long time, so it’s natural that her experiences would have warped her personality. Although, according to the myths, the Supreme God Amaterasu was temperamental, easy to offend, and spoiled by her relatives, so even in the olden days she acted like a young woman.”

“Hm? What what? Are we talking about me?”

Tsurugi came back carrying a tray with four drinks on it in her tiny hands, and gave the people at the table a smile.

“Here you go everyone. I brought back a few different kinds of drinks, so just pick the one you like~~.”

“...”

Kagami seemed like she was in a sour mood, but still picked up the drink nearest to her.

“Well, compared to the undisciplined, foul-mouthed, bad-mannered neesan I’m used to, it’s true this new neesan can certainly be described as more ‘cute.’ But in the end, I have to say I prefer th- pffuuhh?!?!”

Kagami spat out a mouthful of her drink.

“What a terrible, awful flavor! Neesan, what in the world did you put in this drink?!”

“Ahahaha~~. Kagami-chan got the grand prize! That’s my special patented ‘Tsurugi Blend,’ brewed and tested with diligent care to taste worse than vomit! Fear its power, ahaha~!”

“You damn hag! I regret ever feeling worried about you... ugh! You lost your memory but that mischievous brat inside you is still alive and well, isn’t she?! I’m going to punch your face in, so be sure to stand still right there!”

“Fuhaha! Kagami-chan, you’ll need much more training if you want to take your older sister on! Take this, the Supreme God Amaterasu’s super secret ultimate skill... Ama-no-Iwato!”

Tsurugi ducked impolitely under the desk, evading Kagami’s attempts to get to her.

There was no evil intent in her behavior; they were just pure, innocent acts.

“You little... ugh.”

Kagami wiped her mouth with a napkin while she grumbled menacingly.

“Well, neesan has always been a clever one, so I am confident she will figure something out even without us worrying about it. Her situation also doesn’t seem to be too urgent... so to be frank, it is quite low on the priorities list.”

“Ahhh, Kagami-chan, so you *are* worried about me, aren’t you? I believed it to be true... Kagami-chan is truly a nice girl.”

Tsurugi’s eyes sparkled as she sat up on her knees and hugged Kagami around the head, stroking it.

Kagami didn’t look too happy with that and pushed Tsurugi off before changing the subject.

“More importantly, there is a much larger issue at present... and I am talking about Sasami-san.”

@@@@@

The waitress brought everyone their food, and the conversation continued as everyone dug in.

“Please take a look at this.”

Kagami picked up a glass of cold water before casually spilling it on the table.

The transparent water didn't go flying everywhere, but instead formed into a perfect circle.

And something appeared in the middle of that round, mirror-like mass of water.

It was a bird's eye view of a city.

"This is the city we live in, Ame-no-Nuboko City.<sup>1</sup> The snow may make things difficult to make out, but this is Konohana Sakuya Academy over here, and here is where we live, the Corpse Ahakihara, and this is sensei and Sasami-san's home... over here."

Kagami pointed to the city view shown in the water.

But when she pointed to our home in that water... all you could see was darkness.

A huge, black circle was hanging over our home.

The fact that everything else in the image looked like a normal town made this mountain-sized black circle all the more surreal.

"Wahh! It's so round! And so black!"

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<sup>1</sup> The Ame-no-Nuhoko is the spear used in Japanese mythology to create the first land on the Earth.

Tama just blurted out her impressions as is.

“It is, isn’t it?” Kagami brushed aside Tama’s comment effortlessly and continued.

“According to neesan, this black circle here is the Ama-no-Iwato. It is something like a barrier that forms when the Supreme God Amaterasu cuts off all ties with the outside world and shuts herself in.”

Everyone turned to look at Tsurugi.

“Umm...”

Seeing everyone’s eyes turned towards her, Tsurugi flushed a bit red and spoke.

“The Supreme God can influence the very foundation of the world itself, and so, when she cuts off her connection with the world, a barrier forms in the space between her and the world. That is the Ama-no-Iwato... it’s a manifestation of the Supreme God’s desire to see nothing else in the world outside, and to have no dealing with that world anymore.”

“This is the ultimate barrier formed from the power of the Supreme God. So, theoretically, it is impossible for the gods of this land to break through it. It is also impossible to tell what is going on inside of it from the outside.”

Kagami continued where Tsurugi left off and sighed.

“Although we cannot even be sure if this barrier was formed out of Sasami-san’s free will or not, even if she does possess the power of the Supreme God, all we can say is that this is a sign the Supreme God has abandoned her duty to maintain the world; thus there is a danger that problematic alterations will run rampant and throw the world into chaos.”

Problematic alterations like this seriously unnatural snow...

“Because of this, I would be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about what Sasami-san is doing right now... so I would like to break through the Ama-no-Iwato and take a look inside. It is not too unusual for Sasami-san to shut herself in, but if she does not take care of the world, we may be looking at a catastrophe waiting to happen.”

“Sasami-san said that she only needed a break before coming back, so I wanted to just leave her be... but it’s quite lonely without her.”

My brother mumbled and then cocked his head to the side.

“But that Ama-no-Iwato is the ultimate barrier, isn’t it? How exactly are you planning to break through it to see inside? I tried to break in with my bicycle many times, but I would always hit an invisible wall and get thrown back...”

“Sensei is quite an incredible person to be trying to break the Ama-no-Iwato with a bicycle. I suppose ignorance is bliss... in any case, normal methods will not make a dent in that barrier.”

Kagami stood up out of her seat as she continued to speak.

“Is everybody finished with their meals? If you have all had your energy replenished, then I would like to begin immediately. Umm...”

In a show of poor manners, Kagami climbed on top of the table.

“What?! What’s going on?! Is Kagami-chan telling us that we’ll be having the inside of her skirt for dessert?! Just the thought makes my heart jump! Thank you God for this feast!”

“Neesan, shut up. Everyone, please come up onto the table with me.”

Kagami’s voice was very cool and collected, so everyone obediently went up onto the table.

Of course, the waitress came over to warn these rude customers to get off the table, but Kagami glared at her. Maybe there was also an altercation involved, but instead of yelling the waitress just gave everyone a smile and walked away.

“It would be troublesome to try and travel through the snow, so I would like to use this water mirror as an entrance to begin our invasion into the Ama-no-Iwato.”

Kagami pointed to the pool of water on the table (the “water mirror”) which was still showing the image of the town.

“This will be a rather violent trip, so I urge everyone to hold on so we do not get separated.”

“Okaay~~.”

Tama gave an energetic response and latched tightly onto Kagami’s arm.

“... Sensei, you as well.”

Kagami tried to act casual and reached out a hand towards my brother.

“Understood!” My brother energetically took that hand.

“Funyaa,” Kagami seemed satisfied for some reason. But then...

“H-Hmm? Am I too late? What should I do...?”

Both of Kagami's hands were now taken, so Tsurugi didn't know what to do.

"Tsurugi-nee, Tama has a hand free!"

Trying to be a good girl, Tama reached her palm out to her oldest sister, who had been left out.

"Thank you, Tama-chan!" Tsurugi smiled and then grabbed tight onto Tama's torso, diving right under her clothes while her breathing grew more and more ragged.

"Hyaauunn?!"

Tama seemed surprised.

"W-What is it, Tsurugi-nee? Aren't we going to hold hands? Kyahaha, that tiiickles~~! Ahhnn... Tsurugi-nee, stop moving so much under my clothes~~..."

"A-Amazing! You're so soft and warm... it's like my entire face is being enveloped in kindness! Tama-chan, you're seriously amazing! You have the ripeness and sexual appeal of an adult woman, but the sensitivity of an elementary schooler! **To think that heaven existed so close to me!**"

"Neesan, please shut up or go die."

Tsurugi was wriggling around under Tama's clothes and holding her two bulges up with her head. Kagami glared at her as if she was looking at something dirty.

Tsurugi gripped her fists tight even as she sighed in pure bliss.

"Don't you worry, Kagami-chan! You don't have to be jealous! I'm close enough to fully protect Kagami-chan's extremely refined body as well!"

"Neesan, why exactly won't you die? Or rather, why are you alive anyway?"

One of Tsurugi's greedy hands reached out and searched for Kagami's breasts as Kagami let out an extremely resigned sigh.

"Well, I suppose it's not a bad thing that you are so energetic. We will begin our invasion now, so please refrain from doing anything idiotic. It will feel like sinking into water, so when I give you the sign, please close your eyes and hold your breath."

Kagami gave those instructions, and then issued the command.

The group leaned forwards precariously, like they were about to leap into the small puddle of water...

"Well, here we go... one, two, three!"

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*Splash!*

**Chapter 3: Winter (Back Half)**

Kagami and the others suddenly vanished from the family restaurant.

I panicked and desperately fiddled with the Oniichan Surveillance Tool, trying to look for them.

Being gods, Kagami and the others were able to cross unimaginable distances in an instant which would make it quite difficult to locate them.

“ ... ”

I grumbled to myself while laying on my side in my bed, illuminated by the many lights in my room.

“So they really are coming here to see me... but *that’s one thing I’ll never let them do*. The Ama-no-Iwato should stop anybody from coming in... but this is the Yagami sisters we’re talking about, so I have to make a few more preparations.”

Using a god’s-eye view, I finally discovered the Yagami sisters and my brother quite high in the sky, directly above the Ama-no-Iwato.

I strongly willed it and created alterations in the space above me.

“I won’t lose.”

I was a bit reluctant to butt heads like this with all the people who had protected me...

But right now.

No matter how much I have to force it, I will not try hard.

“I definitely won’t let you into my room...!”

@@@@@

Everyone was right above my house, which had now turned into the Ama-no-Iwato.

The snow still steadily trickled downwards making everything difficult to see.

The Yagami sisters and my brother had teleported themselves here by passing through that water mirror and were now in freefall while still holding onto each other.

“There is something rather ominous in the air.”

If they continued to fall like this, they would reach the very top of the Ama-no-Iwato. However, there was something strange about their surroundings.

The normal little houses crowded around the huge black circle beneath began to go through alterations right before their very eyes.

“Uwa...”

Kagami did not sound pleased.

Many of the buildings had instantly transformed into clusters of military weapons.

Buildings that had been normal houses just a second ago were now completely transformed into infantry battalions, tanks, fighter jets, military helicopters, cannons, nuclear missiles, and even aircraft carriers and gunships which, in principle, should’ve been useless on land. All of them readied their guns and took aim.

Their target, of course, was my brother and the Yagami sisters, who were still in freefall.

Suddenly, an extremely loud voice echoed through the town.

**“This is a warning!”**

Kagami looked down... and a huge image of me from the bust up appeared on the surface of that large, black, impenetrable Ama-no-Iwato.

“Sasami-san?!”

My brother yelled out, sounding both happy and surprised.

I ignored him, and after clearing my throat, I gave out a clear warning.

I had to make things clear, or else they might not understand.

**“If you come any closer, I will fire, even if it is oniichan and you three! You don’t have to worry about me, so just leave me alone! Oniichan, you can just sleep at school or go find a hotel or something! I just want to be alone!”**

“That’s...!”

My brother began to grieve.

“Why must you say such cruel things, Sasami-san?! Your oniichan is lonely! Your oniichan doesn’t even want to be separated from you by two feet! If your oniichan doesn’t suck in your breath, doesn’t take in your sweat and your tears... your **Sasami juices**... then his entire body will just break down and he’ll die!”

What the hell are “Sasami juices” ...?

**“Shut up, pervert! I’m also lonely! No, that’s not it... uhh...there’s a few things I need to deal with, so I don’t want to see anyone! Just leave me alone! Don’t worry, it’s not like I hate oniichan or any of you or anything like that! I’m also not trying to do anything evil or anything, so just leave me alone!”**

“Sasami-san, is that not just a bit selfish?”

Kagami calmly spoke to me.

“You shut yourself in completely, and then summon the Ama-no-Iwato, and even though you possess the power of the Supreme God, you have neglected your duties to take care of the world. If this goes any further, the world will be thrown into chaos and come apart at the seams.”

**“I really want to but it’s impossible! It’s not like I wanted the Ama-no-Iwato to appear... it just did on its own! So I can’t just wish it away!”**

That was the honest truth.

It's not like I had perfect control over the power of the Supreme God.

This power was way too great to be held in a single human body; so, it tended to overflow, and I often couldn't control it.

As long as I didn't want to meet with anybody else, the Ama-no-Iwato would not disappear.

**"I'll try my best to get rid of the Ama-no-Iwato and do something about these issues I'm dealing with, and I'll get back to being a normal girl soon! So just believe in me and wait for me!"**

"So you're dealing with some 'issues' then."

My words seemed to have been counterproductive.

Kagami still kept her calm.

"Aren't you forgetting why we're here, Sasami-san? If there is something that's bothering you, then please let us help. We'll all help you."

Ugh, this is the one time when I *really* don't want your help. Thanks but no thanks!

I could feel my annoyance rising, and maybe because of the issues I was dealing with, I also couldn't keep calm... so I blew up.

***“Anyway, that’s all I’m going to say! Go away! If you don’t, I’m going to open fire! This is your last warning! Go away before you get hurt!”***

“Open fire, huh...?”

Kagami looked at the giant army under her.

“Do you intend to start a war over this?”

Yes, exactly. That’s *exactly* what was happening here.

“It seems we are being made light of... actually, it is quite saddening to know that Sasami-san has such little faith in our abilities. Or perhaps infuriating.”

Kagami wasn't known for showing much emotion, so she just spat out how she felt while her cheeks flushed slightly red.

“Very well then. We'll force ourselves into your room and make you regret saying these impertinent things. We'll make you apologize after we bring you to tears with a good spanking. And then, we'll save you. No matter how much you might not want it.”

**“Just give up and go home already!!!!”**

I reached the limit of my patience, and gave an order to my army.

These were gods who were altered directly through my will, and so, they were all loyal to me.

Of course, their levels of divinity were no match for those of the Yagami sisters... the Yagami sisters were just in a whole different class.

But even idiots could be useful when used correctly.

Considering I had been protected by the Yagami sisters up until now, I had complete knowledge of their abilities and their way of doing things.

So don't think you can beat me that easily.

Don't underestimate the patience and stubbornness of a hikikomori!

**“Fire!”**

The tanks, the cannons, the infantrymen... everyone fired at the four falling through the air.

It was an overwhelming amount of firepower, enough to turn an entire nation into scorched earth.

“Laughable. To think a shut-in who has never experienced war would think to challenge me!”

Kagami yelled out and all the weapons in her body came out in full force.

She was a kind of spiritual robot who had been remodeled specifically for battle.

She had enough firepower to match an entire army all by herself... no, she would probably even win that matchup.

So of course, a normal army might not have been a match for her.

But I had already guessed that.

Also, it's not like I really wanted to kill any of them.

If I had used real bombs or bullets, then somebody might get hurt.

That's not what I wanted.

These four had come here only because they were worried about me and wanted to help me.

So, it would be extremely selfish of me to actually hurt one of these kind people no matter how much I wanted to shut myself in...

So...

Kagami pointed to the missiles that were closing in on her, and the guns she was equipped with all fired.

The missiles were all shot down.

“Hm...??”

It was right after that.

The missiles all magnificently burst open, and a **mysterious, sticky and goopy liquid** splashed all around.

“What is that disgusting-looking... agh?!”

Kagami seemed frightened at this clearly suspicious liquid and twisted her body to evade.

But she had been caught so off-guard that she couldn't completely dodge the liquid... and a drop of it splashed onto her uniform's sleeve.

Of course, that sleeve melted.

"The liquid melts our clothes?!?!"

Tsurugi's eyes both glittered.

"Sasami-chan, good job! You're brilliant!"

Hey, I really didn't expect anybody to be happy about this...

I might've been a bit weirded out, but I still told it to them straight out.

**"Did you see that?! Those swarms of bullets and bombs are all nonlethal, but they all have that mystery liquid stored inside of them! And that liquid will melt all your clothes and shoes off!"**

"What the hell in the world are you thinkiiiiing?!?!?"

Kagami jetted through the sky with rocket boosters coming out of her legs like the Mighty Atom, trying to avoid the liquid.

But it was like avoiding every drop of rain in a huge storm, so her clothes continued to whittle down to nothing.

It would take no time before she was completely naked.

“W-Why are you doing something straight out of a perverted shounen manga...?!”

For a clean freak like Kagami, this was probably a nightmare.

The other three people simply screamed as they were tossed around by the torrent.

Kagami was a strong girl who had been tempered by lots of experience, so in a normal gun battle she should've been able to adapt to any situation.

But she wasn't used to more vulgar situations like this.

**“I do not want to hurt any of you.”**

The four of them couldn't come any closer due to the hail of bullets, giving me an opening to tell them my true feelings.

**"But if you really want to force your way into my room, then I'll strip you bare, post all these videos online, and introduce you to the world as the Mysterious Flying Nude Model Excellent Kagami!"**

"Have you no heart?!?!"

Kagami screamed out.

For a shy girl like her, this was probably a sentence worse than death.

**"But that's not all! You might only have an underground cult following on the internet at first, but I'll use all of my power to turn you into an international phenomenon! There'll be live action films, you'll become a social icon, and your name will be engraved into legend...! If you don't want that, go away!"**

I was serious.

And I would show no mercy... and send them down into the seventh circle of Hell!

**"Don't think it ends there! After all your clothes are melted away, if that liquid touches your skin, *you'll feel an unnatural pleasure running through your entire body!* You'll start moaning and convulsing and doing other pervy things like that!"**

"W-Why are you doing something straight out of a vulgar late-night anime?!"

**"I don't want to hurt any of you! But I can make you all feel good with a clear conscience! So fly around up there completely naked and struggle with your body twisting back and forth, and let me display your shame to the entire world! If you don't want that, go away!"**

"I thought... Sasami-san... I thought we were friends!"

Kagami was seriously crying now.

"Kagami-chan, calm down."

Maybe she finally began to pity her little sister, but Tsurugi spoke up in a calm voice.

Usually, Tsurugi would've probably enjoyed a situation like this, but in her bugged-out state, she looked completely serious.

I had a bit of a bad feeling about this...

It felt like something unexpected was about to happen...

“Sasami-chan, I’m not too sure what’s happening on your side, but if you are so dead set on keeping us out, then you must be suffering from some dreadful problems. But, if that’s the case... then shouldn't you be able to understand all the more how much Kagami-chan wants to help you?!”

Tsurugi’s eyes shone bright like the sun as she continued to hold onto Tama with one arm.

Meanwhile, at some point, a familiar double-edged blade had found its way into her other hand.

I felt an incredible amount of power begin to gather in that small body of hers.

“All these bombs and bullets flying around are under the protection of the Supreme God’s power, so it will be difficult to use an alteration to disable all of them... but this blade is a different story.”

This was bad.

“Kagami-chan, when I give the signal, use those rocket boosters to head straight for the Ama-no-Iwato! Tama-chan! Normal gods can’t break through the Ama-no-Iwato, but as a next-generation god, you can ignore the rules and just eat through it! Just open a hole big enough for us to fit through!”

“U-Understood.”

“Hueh? O-Okay, Tsurugi-nee...”

Tama and Kagami were both a bit bewildered at Tsurugi’s unusual show of earnestness.

But, along with that surprise, I could see a hint of admiration in their eyes.

Even if she had lost her memories... no, perhaps *because* of it, Tsurugi was able to show us her pure, unadulterated courage and willpower. And both shone brightly up there in the sky.

Tsurugi exhaled sharply as if she was a Chinese martial artist...

-

“Mow them down, Ame-no-Murakumo!!”

-

Tsurugi carelessly swung the sword she had gripped in her hand.

The next moment it was like the clouds had been blown away, allowing the sunlight to stream down...

The countless bullets that were closing in on the four of them and the torrential winds... they all disappeared.

The Ame-no-Murakumo was a divine, holy blade that could exterminate evil.

Also called the grass-mowing sword, this divine instrument could purify anything and had even broken through the tough barrier surrounding the Tsukuyomi Shrine in the past. I had completely forgotten about that.

And to think that the normally lazy Tsurugi could be so proactive like this...

I was stunned, and while I was still trying to figure out a way to deal with this, the three Yagami sisters swiftly carried out the plan that Tsurugi had laid out before, breaking through the black Ama-no-Iwato and rushing into its interior.



3



**Chapter 4: The Innocent, Lovable Sphinx**

“Hau...?”

I felt my entire world shake violently, and I fell off my bed.

After the Yagami sisters had pierced through the Ama-no-Iwato, the shockwaves reverberated through my room, shaking it in all directions.

The Oniichan Surveillance Tool fell off my head, and I felt a sharp pain in my back. I groaned.

The manga on my shelves and the stuffed animals in my room also started tumbling to the ground as well.

“Ooo...”

As I expected, normal methods won’t work here.

This was the Ama-no-Iwato we were talking about: the strongest barrier in Japanese legend, rivaling the strength of the Chikaeshi-no-Oooiwa (the Thousand-Man Boulder) which protected the entrance to the Underworld. And yet, it had been broken. It really seemed like I wouldn’t be able to keep these girls at bay with normal methods.

But I had one more ace in the hole.

I dragged my cumbersome body back into bed and put the Oniichan Surveillance Tool back on my head... I then mustered my strength and created more alterations.

@@@@@

“Ow owwow ow...”

Kagami sat herself up, her eyes tearing up.

It was good and all that Tama had managed to eat through a part of the Ama-no-Iwato, and that they were able to make it inside the black ball.

However, they had come in at such a high speed that they couldn't brake fast enough, and so they magnificently crashed into the ground.

After their emergency landing, the four of them slid along the ground and ended up letting go of each other, which sent them flying in all different directions.

This was the inside of the black ball... the inside of the Ama-no-Iwato.

Luckily, Kagami didn't seem to be hurt very badly, and she took a look around.

"Where are we...?"

Kagami was sitting flat on her ass in the middle of what appeared to be a very normal park.

It was a place for children to play; it had swings and a slide and other toys you'd expect in any average park in any average town.

The world had been painted over in silver just a minute ago, but there were no longer any signs of snow. Instead, the skies were clear and the weather made it feel more like mid-autumn.

Kagami blinked again and again, and stood up timidly.

"According to legend, there is a huge, deep cave within the Ama-no-Iwato. After the famous incident with the Supreme God Amaterasu, the Itsuno-o-Habari and other gods settled down there. In other words, it is a wide territory where the gods can do as they please..."

Kagami fell into thought and cocked her head to the side.

“So we can consider this a small world, a miniature garden that Sasami-san created. It’s quite peaceful here though... hm?”

Kagami knit her brows and continued to mumble.

“It’s becoming quite difficult to talk. As if I cannot move my tongue very well...”

“Ahh, Kagami-nee?”

Tama had also stood up next to Kagami.

Kagami was immediately at a loss for words when she saw Tama.

“Tama...?”

“Hohehh? Yes, I’m Tama.”

Tama responded with a smile. Yes, it really was her.

But... she looked way too young.

Her blonde hair and that circular hair ornament of hers were unchanged.

But, her breasts and butt were now much flatter, and she had become much shorter. She looked almost like a *normal elementary schooler* now.

Her face was also a lot younger now, and she even had one of those elementary school backpacks on her back. She looked completely like a child now.

“Hey hey.”

The now-young Tama approached Kagami, a worried look on her face.

“You’re Kagami-nee, right? *Why are you so small now?*”

“Huh?”

Tama’s words seemed to have worried Kagami a bit, so she took another good look at herself.

At her much shorter limbs and her cherubic, chubby face.

And at the backpack on her back.

Together with her hairstyle that made her look like a Japanese doll, Kagami now looked very *innocent and lovable*.

“W-Why am I a child now?!”

“Kagami-nee is small... but Kagami-nee is just as big as Tama. So, Tama is also small? Hm~~?”

Tama looked down at her own body and looked back up with a sparkling smile.

“Yay yay~~! Kagami-nee, look look! Umm, Tama is small! Tama is! Tama is like an elementary schooler!”

“Well, technically you *really are* an elementary schooler, though...”

Kagami once again fell into thought as she watched Tama excitedly hop all over the place.

*“What’s the meaning of this...? Also, we are supposed to possess the highest class of divinity, so it would be quite difficult to affect us through an alteration. Is this an illusion? No, none of the weapons equipped on my body are responding, so it’s as if I really have been transformed into a powerless elementary schooler...”*

Kagami nervously twisted her body to and fro while looking around.

“This is not good. If we’re attacked while we are like this, then we will be helpless. Also, I cannot freely enact alterations here... perhaps it is because Sasami-san controls this space, or perhaps it is because we have reverted to elementary schoolers. Right now, defeating me would be like taking candy from a baby!”

“Hey hey, Kagami-nee! How old does Tama look? Seven? Eight? Kyahaha~~! Kagami-nee! Tama is so small! Tama could wear kid’s clothes now, right?! She can go play with all the kids in the park and the police won’t come, right?! Tama’s dream has come true! Tama is so happy~~~!”

“Ugh, shut up...”

Kagami did not look very happy as she tried to pry Tama off her, but then she looked a bit puzzled as she moved her gaze around.

“But, is it just me and Tama here...? What happened to sensei and neesan?”

“Ah, Kagami-nee! Isn’t that Tsurugi-nee over there?!”

Tama pointed across the flowerbed where a head of reddish hair was poking out.

Tsurugi didn’t seem to have noticed the others yet, but Kagami let out a sigh of relief.

“Ahh, neesan, you’re all the way over there... neesan has always been rather small so it seems like she didn’t change much at all. Let’s go, Tama. We’re going to meet up with neesan over there.”

“Okaaay~~.”

Tama responded positively, so Kagami took her by the hand and rushed over on her tiny feet.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the flowerbed, Tsurugi was swiftly stripping off her one-piece dress.

“Ufufu...”

She seemed to be straddling a child version of my brother.

She had already tossed her backpack off to the side.

“It’s a small Kamiomi-kun... so cuuute~~.”

Tsurugi licked her lips and began to strip my brother of his clothes as he shivered in fear.

“Don’t be afraid. Just leave it to me... you’re going to be a man way sooner than all your friends at school, you know? Makes my heart race~~. I’ll be the first to bruise this green, unripened fruit... and make you into a man, Kamiomi-kun!”

“What the hell are you doing you loli bitch?!” yelled Kagami as she

rushed over.

“Tch.” Tsurugi clicked her tongue when she saw Kagami. She then quickly wrapped her clothes around herself and stood up with a bit of a blush, acting like nothing had happened.

“Ahh, so I guess Kagami-chan also turned into a child... I wonder what’s going on?”

“You seem to be trying to act as if nothing had happened, but we live in times when that kyah kyah ufufu ufufu stuff is forbidden between two elementary schoolers! Please avoid that type of behavior in the future!”

“Kagami-chan, look look! *I’m wearing a kid’s backpack and I’m naked!*”

Kagami smacked her older sister to the ground and then helped my small brother up to his feet.

“Are you alright, sensei?”

“Yes...”

My brother timidly stood by Kagami’s side, looking around.

If he was an adult, his actions would’ve come off as pretty suspicious, but as a kid, he just looked like a cowering pretty boy, and it made me want to gobble him up. It was strange.

By the way, my brother was still dutifully hiding his face behind his backpack.

“... Hm? I feel Sasami-san’s presence!”

My brother yelled out some crazy-sounding nonsense as he turned to face the park entrance.

And right as rain, right there was...

-

A young version of myself walking along and wearing a kid’s backpack.

-

Oniichan, how exactly did you sense my presence that easily?

Sometimes he does stuff that really makes me doubt his humanity...

“Sasami-san!”

Kagami and the others all made a dash for me.

They flew out of the park and surrounded this young version of myself.

“Please explain exactly what is going on here!”

“W-Wait, Kagami-chan... this is...”

Tsurugi interrupted Kagami and touched the young me.

“This isn’t Sasami-chan herself... it seems to be *one part* of her, but her main body is not here. You could say this is a branch, or an offshoot of her being.”

“...?”

The young me looked suspiciously at Tsurugi and the others before seeming to get frightened and trying to walk quickly away.

At a bit of a loss at this behavior, Kagami began to give chase.

“Wait, neesan! Take a look at *that!*”

Kagami pointed to the backpack the young me was wearing.

It seemed somebody had scribbled a message there in pen or something.

-

**This young version of myself is Tsukuyomi Sasami’s dere side.**

-

“Dere?! What the hell is going on...?!”

Kagami's eyes darted back and forth in bewilderment.

At any rate, the message continued.

I have the utmost respect for you all for breaking through the Ama-no-Iwato and making it this far.

No matter what I put in your way, no matter how much I tell you to go back, it seems everyone is set on trying to enter my room.

It is possible that nothing I can do will be able to stop you, but there are various things happening, and I really don't want to meet with anybody.

So, as a compromise, I would like to play a game with you.

"A game...?"

My brother and the Yagami sisters exchanged glances.

This is a virtual space I created through an alteration within the Ama-no-Iwato, and you three now are no stronger than elementary schoolers.

Tsurugi can no longer use her divine blade, Kagami can no longer use her spiritual weapons, and Tama can no longer use her ability to consume other gods.

This is an alteration I made using the full power of the Supreme God, so it will take quite a while before you can break out no matter how much you struggle.

**Also, trying to struggle will be considered a rule violation and will result in you being ejected from this space, so please be careful.**

**Do not worry. Once the game is finished, you will be returned to normal.**

**“A game...? Well, I guess that’s alright then...”**

**Kagami cocked her head to the side and looked to be at a loss.**

**“So, why do we have to be elementary schoolers...?”**

**Starting now, the young me will start walking to school.**

**Each time you do something that makes the young me happy, you will receive “Sasami Points.”**

**On the other hand, if you do something that the young me does not like, you will lose “Sasami Points.”**

**That young version of me thinks pretty much the same way as the real me, so she has similar hobbies and preferences. So, if you act in a way that would make the real me happy, you will naturally gain Sasami Points.**

“I see, so it’s like affection points in an eroge...”

Kagami mumbled to herself before blushing a bit as a shiver went through her.

“Is what neesan would probably say if she still had her memories...”

**In other words, a person who can earn a lot of Sasami Points is a person who understands me well.**

**I would be okay with letting a person like that help me with my troubles.**

“...!”

My brother jumped a bit.

It seemed like he was really determined to win this game.

**There is a display of your Sasami Points above your heads, so please use that as a reference.**

“Ah, it’s true. There it is.”

Kagami looked up and saw a lit up number was now listed there.

**KG00000.**

She had zero points right now.

And KG was probably an abbreviation of “KAGAMI.”

My brother was KM, Tsurugi was TR, and Tama was TM.

**When the game ends – in other words, when the young me reaches the school – all players who have positive Sasami Points will be invited into my room.**

**However, if you have zero points or less, I refuse to see you, so you will have to withdraw from this place.**

**So, please try your best to do things that will leave you with a positive amount of Sasami Points.**

**Well then... game start!**

“Hm...”

Kagami furrowed her eyebrows and crossed her arms.

“What is the meaning of this...? Could it be that Sasami-san plans to give us no Sasami Points, and because those are the rules of the game, plans to claim she has a legal (?) reason to keep us out of her room? That’s quite roundabout...”

“Tama doesn’t know...”

Tama raised her hands into the air seeming to be genuinely happy that she now looked like a child.

“But we’re close to Tama’s school! That small Mamarin is going to the same school as Tama, right?!”

Mamarin was referring to me, in case you didn’t know.

“Hm, this seems to be quite a detailed recreation of our neighborhood. Now that you mention it, I do recognize many of these buildings. In that case, the elementary school is... ah, it’s quite close. We do not have much time here.”

Kagami nodded and closed in on the young me as I trudged along.

“Well, I suppose it does not hurt to try... let’s see what happens.”

Kagami stood in front of the young me and gave a greeting.

“Good morning.”

“...?”

The young me looked at Kagami suspiciously, when suddenly...

“Question One @ Sasami-san’s favorite snack is which of the following?”

“A: Chocolate.”

“B: Calor\*\* Mate.”

“C: Biscuits.”

That came out of the young me’s mouth.

“... Uh, what?”

Kagami froze up while the young me stared at her, waiting for an answer for a few seconds, when...

*"Time's up."*

The young me quickly looked away from Kagami and continued to walk.

The Sasami Points shown above Kagami's head suddenly became **KG(-)00020**.

"H-Hey, wait just a second!"

Kagami seemed a bit flustered, and tried to grab the young me by the arm.

But she grabbed nothing but air.

Her hand passed through the young me like I was a ghost. This caused Kagami to lose her balance and tumble to the ground.

"Time is up when I reach the school... all actions that might delay that like grabbing my hands and pulling me back or cutting off my legs, for example, are strictly prohibited. Depending on the action, there may also be a penalty incurred, so please be careful."

The young me muttered that in a businesslike tone.

It seemed that Kagami's actions this time indeed incurred a penalty, and her Sasami Points dropped even further.

**KG(-)00220.**

"I see."

My brother seemed to figure out the trick to the game or something, and so he sprinted and quickly moved up to beside the young me.

"That little quiz earlier was related to Sasami-san's likes and dislikes...! I'm not only Sasami-san's family, but I love her more than anybody else in the entire world, so there's no way someone like me wouldn't be able to answer!"

My brother was brimming with confidence.

"For some reason, Sasami-san has started really hating chocolate lately, and Calor\*\* Mate isn't really a snack. Biscuits just dry up Sasami-san's mouth and that's why she said she doesn't like them! So this was a trick question! *None of those choices were right!* So, the snack that Sasami-san likes is..."

My brother suddenly stripped off his shirt and sprung himself upon the young me.

“It’s me, right?! Sasami-san’s favorite sweet in this entire world is her oniichan, right?! That’s the right answer, right?!”

Of course, nobody could touch this young me, so my brother's body just passed right through my younger self, sending him tumbling half-naked onto the road. He ended up collapsed by the roadside, completely beaten up.

The young me looked down at that brother of mine and mumbled.

“... At least make it something edible...”

**KM(-)00050.**

“This is pointless. Sensei is useless here.”

Kagami didn’t pay any heed to my brother as he lay collapsed by the road, and instead just ran up to me again.

“I remember exchanging mails with Sasami-san and learning what her favorite snack was. It was... hmm... pickled kelp, right?”

“Correct.”

*Ding dong~~!*

A cheap-sounding bell rang out, and the score above Kagami's head changed to **KG(-)00170**.

Kagami seemed quite excited about that, but then the young me turned to her and spoke in a low voice.

**Now the real game begins.**

Kagami cocked her head at those ominous words. The next second, it happened.

A car suddenly rounded the corner and sped right for them, striking the young me hard and sending that body flying through the air.

“...!”

In the middle of a tragic, gruesome pile of blood and guts, the young me now spoke weakly.

“Question Two @ Sasami-san has been hit by a car! What do you do?”

“A: Try to call an ambulance but accidentally call a hearse instead. -> Wow, what a time-saver!”

“B: Make the spilled organs into sausage and find huge success opening a butcher shop. -> HAPPY END!”

“C: Use biotechnology to cultivate the pieces of flesh strewn around and make a Sasami-san clone. -> A victory for science!”

“What kind of question is this?! Also, why are those the only options?!?!”

Kagami and the others continued to be tossed around by the waves of this game.

**Chapter 5: Behind the Door**

I knew all I was doing was buying myself some time.

My brother might've been an idiot, but the Yagami sisters were not to be trifled with... they would probably find a way to guess my plans and break through the trap, making their way into my room.

"Of course, the best case scenario would be for them to just not realize anything and end up going home..."

In my heart of hearts, I did want to ask everyone for help.

I wanted to see them, talk about my problems, and then reach some kind of solution.

After all, I was weak and needed the help of others.

But that's why, to make sure this weak, dependent part of myself didn't accidentally conjure up an alteration that would bring my brother and the others here, I had already cut that part of myself off and customized it into "Tsukuyomi Sasami's dere side."

Like this, I should be able to defend against unforeseen events to some degree.

“One... two... one... two...”

I opened the door to my room (the one with a large sign on it which read “To those who plan to break into my room: Cursed be you all. -Tsukuyomi Sasami”) and began to drag my unconscious brother and the three unconscious Yagami sisters one by one into my room.

Everyone had his or her eyes shut as they were all sleeping.

I was never very physically strong (and, for various reasons, right now I couldn’t move my body as well as normal), so it was really tough carrying these people into my room, but with the help of some alterations, I managed.

My brother and the others were really worried for me and had come to help me.

I knew that all too well.

But... I also had to try my very best.

@@@@@@

“Phew.”

Even though it was winter, I had broken out into a sweat. I wiped my forehead while lining these four bodies up on my bed.

Not a single one of them seemed to recognize where they were though.

Even with the full strength of the Supreme God, it was difficult to affect the Yagami sisters with an alteration.

However, there was one other time in the past when these seemingly invincible girls had been robbed of their powers and rendered relatively harmless.

That was the time of the Yamata no Orochi SNS incident.

During that incident, all our psyches had been separated from our bodies, and none of us could use our divine abilities as we wished.

What I had done here was very similar to what had happened then.

The instant they had broken through the Ama-no-Iwato, everyone was busy dealing with the resultant shockwave.

So, I had used that little gap to *separate their psyches from their bodies*.

I left their bodies as is, but threw their psyches into a few dolls I had made.

These were the dolls which looked like younger versions of themselves.

If they were in kid's bodies, then they would be immature and inexperienced; it would be hard for them to move around, and I wouldn't be surprised if they lost the ability to use any of their spiritual powers. Sounds reasonable, right?

And then, it was just a matter of not letting them realize that their psyches had been separated from their true bodies.

To do this, I would continue to throw impossible problems and riddles at them and force them to play a game they would never be able to win.

When they failed, I would also give them the option of retrying. I assumed they would get desperate and hotheaded and try the game over and over and over again.

Or maybe they would give up at some point and go home.

I didn't care which one ended up happening.

At any rate, while they were busy with their "game," I would be free to carry out my plans.

“Umm...”

I gulped and went over to one particular person on my bed...

Over to *Tama*. I picked up one of her soft, flawless arms.

“Tama is a next-generation god, and so, she can consume the older-generation gods.”

She could eat and absorb any of the gods who wielded authority right now... she was a predator who could ignore all the rules and make everything her own.

“If there’s one being who could *gouge a hole in... even kill the person who has the power of the Supreme God...* it’s Tama.”

So, I chose Tama’s arm as my lethal weapon, and pointed it towards my own body.

I wasn’t planning to die here.

But this was definitely a plan that needed a lot of determination.

“Before everyone else figures out the game they’re playing or accidentally clears it and charges into this room... I have to do something about this body.”

If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be able to look them in the face.

I’m sure they would just worry and ask me a lot of annoying, prying questions... but in the end, I doubted any of them could do anything about *this*.

All that would happen is that I would end up piling my problems on them, things would get awkward, and they would go out of their way to keep me happy.

I would rather die than face that.

“Okay... on three...”

My face paled as I held Tama’s arm up and prepared to bring it down on myself.

“Theoretically, a next-generation god can eat even the Supreme God from the old generation. It’s like when the wolf Fenrir killed Odin by eating him... I’ll be okay. This will work. One... two...”

@@@@@

It was the end of a civilization.

*They* were sweeping over the land with their overwhelming power, and as the new, proud conquerors of the world, they were killing countless humans in the blink of an eye.

The war had spread like a massive forest fire, and this peaceful little town had already fallen prey to the evil.

They showed no mercy, even if their opponents were normal people.

Killing humans was like squashing a bug to them. They felt nothing.

In their eyes, humanity itself was nothing more than garbage lying at the roadside.

“Please stand up to their overwhelming cruelty, struggle through their frightening weaponry, and **send me safely to school.**”

“Wait please.”

Kagami reached out and tried to stop the young me from walking forwards.

But, she remembered that this young me was like a ghost and couldn't be touched, so she just sighed with an exhausted look on her face.

"This is... clearly strange..."

The score **KG(-)12035** was displayed above her head.

"I have no idea what's going on..."

Her Sasami Points were in a terrifyingly rapid freefall, and her prospects of clearing this game were very depressing at this point.

By the way, Kagami's score was still relatively high... everyone else's score was already **(-)99999**. Of course, this was just because the digital display didn't go past five digits. In reality, their scores were probably even more dreadful.

"Kagami-nee~..."

Even the innocent, naïve Tama looked a bit stumped.

"Tama is tireed... aren't we done yeeett~~?"

The four of them were in a normal-looking residential district, but there were round and cigar-shaped UFOs flying through the sky, which were continuously sending down what looked like giant insect monsters awkwardly walking on two legs. The aliens were also shooting extremely destructive laser guns.

A house burst into flame and evaporated nearby... but Tama just grumbled.

“Tama is booorreeed... Tama is going home!”

“Just be patient for a bit longer, Tama-chan.”

Tsurugi gripped Tama’s hand tightly with a worried expression on her face.

Now that the Yagami sisters were elementary schoolers, they couldn’t use any special abilities and couldn’t fight very well either.

They had no choice but to just try and follow the rules of the game, but there was very little they could actually accomplish. They were just continuously tossed around by the game, and were closing in on total exhaustion.

“That’s right, Tama-san. We’re here to save Sasami-san.”

My brother seemed to be able to motivate himself on that point alone, and he was still one of the more energetic players.

“All we can do is try to build up Sasami Points before that young Sasami-san over there reaches her school. But, this game is strange... it started out as a quiz game, but now it’s slowly turning into a shounen alien invasion manga...”

“In any case, it seems that we can earn Sasami Points by defeating these alien-like creatures.”

Kagami had picked up one of the insect people’s laser guns somewhere and shot down a UFO with it.

“It seems that we receive 200 points for shooting down a UFO... hm, we should try to do things that Sasami-san would want us to do, or things that would make her happy in order to obtain Sasami Points. In that case, if we exterminate some of these insect people that are blocking her path to school, then we should be able to earn more points.”

But the aliens weren’t about to ignore the fact that one of their UFOs had been shot down.

The insect people let out a shriek high enough to crack glass before coming at Kagami with their strong arms swinging. Kagami’s body was completely torn up.

Ironically, she had been torn up like a small insect by a human.

The elementary schooler, Kagami, was now in pieces.

“I died again...”

Kagami’s corpse vanished, while a healthy, spotless Kagami appeared once again at the young me’s side.

In this game, you would revive no matter how many times you died.

“Death subtracts 10000 points from your score. This game is impossible.”

“This is too mean! It’s not fair!”

Tama rubbed her eyes as she began to cry.

“Mamarin doesn’t want to see Tama. Mamarin hates Tama!”

Tama looked much younger now, so her sorrowful pleas were much sadder than usual.

“She locked herself in, then made this Ama-no-Iwato thing, and now she’s making us play this bad game so we get sad and go home! That’s so mean, Mamarin! Tama and the others are just worried... we just want to see you happy!”

Kagami hung her head at her little sister’s mournful screams.

She was always so calm and emotionless, but it seemed she might've also reached her limit.

"Sasami-san!"

Her young, round eyes filled with tears as she glared at the young me.

"I'll never give up!"

As the young me just continued to simply walk towards school through all that wanton destruction, Kagami picked up another laser gun and fired blindly at the enemy.

"You've made this hellish, hopeless game for us, but no matter how unfair it might be, I'll get through it and clear it, even if it takes me an eternity! No matter how many times I die, no matter how much it hurts, I'll never give up and go home!"

-

"... Why?"

-

The young me suddenly muttered that.

It seems that Kagami's strong emotions had genuinely reached this part of me.

"Why are you willing to go so far? Being forced to play this impossible, mean-spirited game for the sake of an ungrateful girl who won't even show her real face to you... why do you want to meet with her so much? *I hope you realize that meeting that girl is the only thing you'll get through this game.*"

Even if she beat the one in a million odds to clear this painful game, the only thing waiting for her at the other end was me.

Did she want to meet me so she could yell at me?

Maybe she wanted to punch me and tell me to stop screwing with her?

"Because we're worried for you."

The one who answered was my brother, who had also picked up a laser gun like Kagami.

“Because we can’t watch as someone who always works so hard tries to deal with such a heavy burden all by herself. Because someone who is usually so spoiled and pampered is trying to fight something alone and rejecting all help from others. All of that makes us worry.”

Tama and Tsurugi also ran up.

Even the usually good-natured Tama and Tsurugi were probably starting to get fed up with this game.

But I had a feeling that beyond that, they were also trying to do all this for my sake.

Even though they weren’t any stronger than a normal person, they fought through their tears and challenged this unfair, cruel game that the Supreme God had fashioned for them.

It was a beautiful sight.

It was enough to touch the heart of someone who had decided to shut everyone out.

“Why?”

The young me just stood there, stock-still, and began to tremble.

“Why? Why? Why?”

I repeated that like a broken computer.

A broken computer which had just tried to load a program it didn’t understand.

“Worry? Why? Because you’re family? Because you’re friends? You’re just acting out of a sense of duty, right? In reality, you want to go back, right? Or you’re actually angry at me for this prank, so in order to meet with me you’re just acting nice...”

“Stop grumbling all that nonsense.”

Kagami led the way and beckoned to the young me.

“Let’s go. To your place.”

Kagami said that with a beautiful, *human* expression on her face, one filled with both sadness and anger.

“Of course I’m angry. Let me just ask you one question: *why won’t you believe in us?* It doesn’t matter what secret you might be hiding, or how heavy the burden is that you might be carrying right now. Why are you trying to drive us away instead of letting us help you carry your burdens, carry your sins... that’s what I am angry about. Of course I am angry about that!”

Flames seemed to dance in Kagami’s eyes as she shouted.

“‘Why,’ you ask? Because I’m worried about you, of course! Because we’re friends! Please do not make me spell it out word for word for you. *It’s because I love you!* Please believe me and let me see you... I want to see Sasami-san...!”

Kagami collapsed to the ground, her hands covering both her eyes.

Seeing that...

I couldn’t take it anymore.

-

“U. Uuu... uuuuuu...”

-

The young me began to tremble, hair in disarray and feet rooted to the spot.

At the same time, the war raging on around them froze, as if someone had pushed the pause button on a remote.

The UFOs soaring to and fro, the insect people, the laser beams flying through the air... it all stopped.

And in that frozen world, the young me began to cry.

Tears began to fall to the ground as I looked at Kagami.

“... Can I believe you?”

Those words came right from the heart and echoed my true desires.

“The situation is not pretty beyond those doors. If you meet me as I am now, then everyone will be disillusioned. You will end up hating me. That’s what I believed... but even though you’ve gone through so much pain here, why won’t you go back? Kagami... everyone... you’re all being so...”

It was at that moment.

At that moment, I was defeated.

“I... I love you all too... I want to meet you, to hear your voices, to be together with you all... but I’m scared that you won’t like me anymore!”

A fanfare of trumpets rang through the air.

It was like a tune announcing the possibility for a huge comeback win at the end of a game show.

The digital counter displayed above Kagami’s head began to spin with great force... the astronomically negative score disappeared and was replaced with a positive number.

There must’ve been thousands... millions of points added to her score in one go.

Watching these events unfold, Tsurugi softly walked up to Kagami and began to mutter to her.

“Kagami-chan, were you expecting this to happen?”

She had quite a proud look on her face.

“That elementary schooler version of Sasami-chan is her dere part... it was changed through an alteration into being a lot more robotic, but all of Sasami-chan’s affections towards us were hidden somewhere underneath. Did you say all those awfully embarrassing things so you could get right through to that hidden part and score us massive points?”

“I am a manipulative schemer, after all.”

Kagami wiped her eyes, looking a bit frustrated that the tears were still coming despite her best efforts.

“An impossible game... this game is a manifestation of Sasami-san’s wish to see *nobody in her room*. In that case, the best way to proceed is to *shake the foundations of that very desire*. We just have to make that idiot realize that it is okay to trust us.”

Kagami said that in a pretty curt tone, but...

“Well, everything worked out, so I am satisfied. I can feel my tongue rotting through from saying things that I really didn’t mean. That Sasami-san, taking up so much of our time...”

@@@@@

One... two..... three!

I brought Tama's god-eating arm down towards my body.

It was at that moment.

-

"Okay, that's quite enough of that."

-

Suddenly, I heard a voice.

At the same time, I felt someone grabbing me and pulling me towards them from behind.

... Who was it?

"You moooron. Didn't I tell you not to push yourself? But here you are goin' off an' trying to put each and every little damn thing on yourself. Trying to act cool and stuff and pretending everything's okay? Tch, as if anything's okay, idiot."

I heard a voice behind me speaking in pretty sketchy, masculine Japanese.

It was a sweet voice, but it was also the most dependable voice in the world.

“Tsu... rugi...?”

Rather startled, I turned to check who was holding onto me.

“Yup. It’s me.”

And this wasn’t the bugged-out Tsurugi I had seen earlier... it was the normal, cheeky, arrogant midget sensei I was used to.

She held me in a gentle embrace, stopping me from doing something rash with Tama’s arm.

“Brats like you should stop thinking you can pull one over on the adults. Well, you did bring my body in here nice and easy for me, so I guess I gotta give my thanks. I’ve been borrowing your body for a bit, but all that’s left is putting my heart into that body there, and then it’ll be like *whoosh!* Tsurugi-chan revival!”

“W-What is going on?”

I had no idea what was going on.

*Borrowing my body*, she said?

“Well, I’ll explain everything later. More importantly... looks like I didn’t have to come all the way out here. I’d cover my ears for a sec.”

“Huh? Huhhh?”

My eyes darted back and forth around my room in confusion.

-

“Sorry for the intrusion.”

-

After that polite greeting, a huge explosion blew my door off its hinges, like someone had hooked up a block of C4 to it.

My room was really big though, so the wind from the explosion thankfully didn’t reach my bed.

But what the hell?!

I saw someone emerge from that dense smoke, looking like she had just come back from war...

It was the lovable, young version of Kagami. She was quickly followed by my brother, Tsurugi, and then Tama.

Everyone looked like an elementary schooler.

Kagami spoke proudly as she fiddled with her hair.

“My my, it seems we have finally arrived. It was nice and all that we earned so many Sasami Points, but then that young Sasami-san started sobbing and we could not move her, so we were at a bit of a loss...”

I had stopped paying attention to the game for a while, so I had no idea what she was talking about.

“I’m quite disappointed in how much you underestimated us, Sasami-san. That dere part of Sasami-san was a part of you... she wasn’t completely cut off from you, thus she still retained a connection to you.”

Also, this normal Tsurugi that was here with me might’ve been sending them some kind of signal.

A signal telling them that I was here, or something like that.

“The only thing we had to do was follow that connection and find our way here. This body is quite difficult to use though, so it was slow-going.”

While she said that, the child version of Kagami walked up to her body on the bed, and through a strong force of will, took her original body back.

The young Kagami crumbled to the ground powerlessly.

“Hm.”

Kagami clenched and unclenched her fists to test them out before she yawned.

“Funyaa. As expected, this body is still the most fitting. The sleepiness is a bit troubling, though.”

“Kagami is a spiritual robot... her body is a doll that was made by that evil organization, so I bet she was quick to realize something was up with her body and could get a handle on things.”

Tsurugi put her arms around the young Kagami and held her with a somewhat sketchy look on her face.

“Fufufu, well, Kagami has looked the same since I met her, so it’s pretty fresh to see her look like an elementary schooler... makes me feel kinda hot.”

*“Why does that make you feel hot? That goes beyond disgusting and into the realm of just plain terrifying.”*

At that point, Kagami seemed to finally realize that there were two Tsurugis in the room, and she gave a start.

“H-Hmm? Neesan...? You’re neesan... right?”

“Yo.”

Tsurugi scratched her cheeks, seeming a bit annoyed by the situation.

“Ah... well, looks like stuff got a bit complicated. I’ll explain everything nice and easy later. But for now, wanna give me a ‘welcome back’ kiss?”

“Ahh, yes, you are certainly neesan. I suppose not even death is a cure for stupidity.”

Kagami ignored her older sister who was jutting out her lips in an inviting gesture. She let out a sigh.

“Sensei, Tama... please return back to your original bodies as well.”

“Ehh...”

Tama didn't seem very happy, stomping her feet.

“Tama likes being small! Tama is an elementary schooler, so she should be small!”

It was rare to see Tama being so defiant.

But I guess to an elementary schooler, the beautiful body Tsurugi had used to house the next-generation Supreme God was a bit too much to handle.

It seemed that Tama had quite a complex about it.

“That body is nothing but a doll. It is unfit to be the body of a god for the next generation.”

Kagami spoke candidly.

“And, if you are not a god of the next generation, then there is no value in your existence. At the very least, there would be no more benefit for us to protect you... you would no longer be part of our family, but would be an outsider.

So, please choose, Tama. Do you want to be a *normal, small elementary schooler*, or do you want to be *part of our family*?”

“U-Uu...? Tama wouldn’t be family anymore...?”

Tama’s eyes welled up with tears as she reluctantly walked over to her body.

After she had returned to the normal huge Tama, she pulled Kagami into a tight embrace.

“Tama doesn’t want that, Kagami-nee. Tama is Tsurugi-nee and Kagami-nee’s little sister.”

“... Good girl, Tama. Even if you’re big, even if you’re different from the other children, I will love you nonetheless.”

In a rare display of kindness, Kagami stroked Tama on her back.

@@@@@

“Now then.”

Kagami glared at me while still in Tama’s embrace.

By the way, as soon as the girls had barged into my room, I had covered myself with my futon and was cowering alongside my wall.

I couldn't show them what I looked like.

"Sasami-san. Would you please explain the situation to us now? I would like to know whether this big farce actually had a point to it. What was your reason for chasing us away, even after we came to see you out of pure worry for you? I may not forgive you depending on your answer."

I resigned myself after seeing that scary expression on Kagami's face, and turned to look at her.

However, I really didn't know how to explain things.

"Don't sound so critical, Kagami. I'm sure she has her reasons."

Tsurugi looked quite pleased with herself as she added the young Kagami and Tama (now both empty shells) to her collection, and just said the first random thing that popped into her head.

"A picture's worth a thousand words, right? So c'mon, show us your face."

Tsurugi came over with an exasperated look in her eyes and tore off my futon.

I had finally been exposed.

“.....” “.....” “.....” “.....”

Nobody could say a word.

Seeing no more hope for escape, I plopped myself down.

-

Let me try to express the situation in objective terms.

For example, suppose I was a god looking down from above, or a reader with a full view of the story.

And in that story, there was a lump of meat.

A big, soft, flabby lump of meat.

Well, no... if you squint your eyes really hard, you would finally realize that this lump of meat was actually a person.

It had hands, feet, and even though they were squashed by layers and layers of fat, it had eyes and a nose and a mouth as well.

My pajamas were almost bursting from housing my swelling body and just moving that body around took most of my strength.

I had timidly put myself on a scale, and found that I was around 250 kilograms heavy.

I was violently chubby.

Completely, completely fat.

-

Everyone's eyes were centered on me.

"Umm..."

I felt dizzy and my vision clouded with tears. I had reached my limit, so I just spat everything out.

“When I woke up, I was like this... and I couldn’t ask anybody about it. I tried to go back to normal by using an alteration, but I couldn’t. I thought everyone would hate me when they saw me this fat, that oniichan would abandon me. So I... and...”

I burst into tears.

“I didn’t know what to do! I wanted to just have some time to think and wanted to believe this was all some kind of mistake, but you all *had* to come over and try to barge in here! Can’t you think a bit about how I feel?! Go away! Just go away! It’s not like you can do anything about this, right?! Now that you know, it’s not like you have any bright ideas, right?! So just... just...!!”

“Umm...”

Kagami asked a question with complete seriousness.

“You’re Sasami-san, right...? You look more like just a *lump of meat* though...”

I felt hurt at those words, and once again, I pulled my futon over my head.

Kagami didn’t seem to know what to do, but tried to reassure me.

“Umm, please calm down, Sasami-san. You can’t get that way overnight, so I’m sure this is some mistake... or no, probably some irregularity, or some strange disease...”

Kagami shook me with all her might from the other side of the futon.

“I see. Sasami-san wouldn’t see anybody because her body was like this... I understand how you might feel, but please don’t overlook us, Sasami-san. We’re friends, right? I wish you would’ve talked to us about this sooner.”

“Kagami...”

I sniffled, and clung onto the hand that Kagami had held out to me.

I had a feeling that Kagami would say something like that... but I was still afraid.

This is the first time something like this had happened to me.

I didn’t know how other people might react to me, and so I unconsciously rejected everyone else and made the Ama-no-Iwato... I was a fool.

“Well, don’t worry. I can explain *that*.”

Tsurugi pointed at me, not seeming too pleased with this situation.

“Looks like stuff got more complicated... but everything is that Tsukuyomi priestess’s fault. Sasami-san’s mom, I mean. Well, I guess that doesn’t really clear anything up. But let’s just say that there’s something we still have to do... so if you would just follow me for a bit...”

Tsurugi smiled and thrust her finger at my forehead.

Like her finger was the tip of a sword.

At that moment, I felt a heavy drowsiness fill my body...

“I’ll be sure to explain everything, and then we can decide what to do.”

Only Tsurugi’s voice rang like a ray of sunlight through the darkness.

“Don’t try to handle everything by yourself. This isn’t your fault at all.”

Her words sank deep into me, enveloping me in kindness.

And then, this mess we had gotten ourselves into gave birth to the beginning of *another story*.

**Chapter 6: Micchan's (alias) Business Logbook (Part 1)**

**Tsukuyomi Shrine Business Logbook. Scribe: Micchan (alias).**

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**Month of \*\*, Day &&. Cloudy, and then rainy.**

-

**Once again, the weather has been depressing since morning.**

**I've spent this entire day going around and seeing all my colleagues at the Tsukuyomi Shrine who had suffered grave injuries from the events of the other day.**

**Physical injuries could be healed with alterations or other techniques, but the spiritual injuries caused by massive irregularities were much more serious and were the reason my colleagues were still bedridden.**

**The only two left unharmed were myself (being a bit special) and the head of the household, Tsukuyomi Ruza, who was a spiritualist of immense power. Also, I've heard he has been at least called a genius and a prodigy since childhood.**

That head of the household has been holed up under the kotatsu<sup>1</sup> in our apartment since morning, and he has not moved for the entire day from that position.

Sometimes he changes the TV channel or munches on a potato chip, or he says something like “Ahhh, I really don’t want to work...”

I didn’t have much else to do, so I took this opportunity to record the household head’s words.

Statistically, the three things he says the most are “I don’t want to work,” “I don’t want to try,” and “I want to die.” Of those, he has said “I don’t want to work” 132 times, “I don’t want to try” 1032 times, and it is impossible to count how many times he has said “I want to die.”

-

Month of \*\*, Day %%. Heavy rain.

-

The rain is still pouring, making it impossible to do laundry.

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<sup>1</sup> Heated table. Very comfy.

The head of the household seemed to have realized that I've been recording his statements, and more variety has popped up in his speech patterns.

He has also started saying things like "I think people who try are people who lose," and "I'm only human, so it's okay if I don't try."

If that was all, I would've been able to ignore all this as the ravings of an idiot, but each time he says something he looks at me with this proud look on his face. I could feel my irritation growing, until I finally snapped.

I felt my mind go pure white, and when I came to, a few hours had passed. I also noticed that the household head was now kneeling prostrate in front of me, completely naked.

The household head suddenly went from calling me "Micchan" (alias) to "Mii-sama" (alias).

He should know my real name, so why was he calling me by an alias anyways?

I pointed this out to him, at which point he started saying "I humbly apologize, Master."

Exactly how am I supposed to react when a middle-aged man, who is not only my employer but also my foster parent, starts calling me "Master"?

That night, while we slept with our futons lined up next to each other, I heard him begin talking in his sleep. “*Sob... hic... I’m so lonely, Juju-chan... let me put my head on your lap while you stroke my head...*” he said.

From that, I deduced that his usual archaic way of speaking was just an act.

I had to do something quick about this useless person... I suppose that with the everyday chores around the shrine being handled by priestesses like me, and with Juju-sama doing most of the real work all by herself, the house head has developed quite a habit of laziness.

Even though his daughter Sasami-sama had been such a serious, hard-working person...

Aren’t you happy, Sasami-sama?

Happy that you came out more like your mother.

-

Month of \*\*, Day ##. Clear skies, but high tide.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is apparently in reference to a description of battle conditions during the Russo-Japanese war, made by Akiyama Saneyuki.

-

Today was my birthday.

The head of the household gave me a collar. Was this supposed to be a birthday present?

The name of the household head was engraved into the collar.

The household head then began pretending to be a dog while completely naked. I felt a hard-to-describe feeling welling up within me. This led to my mind going completely white again, and when I came to, the household head was

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Juju-sama, Sasami-sama, I don't care which one of you it is, but can someone please come back.

Micchan (alias) is already at her limit.

**PART 2: Hitsugi-no-Miko<sup>1</sup>**

**Chapter 7: For the Sake of this World, for the Sake of the Humans in this World**

Both of my eyes opened wide.

All I could see around me was *rotting flesh*.

“Kyaaaaaaaaahhhh!!!”

I had no idea what was going on.

From what I could see, I was surrounded by a flock of disgusting-looking zombies.

Yes, zombies.

They clearly were not alive. I saw brown and black lumps of rotting flesh shaped like humans all around me; sidling up to me while letting out what could best be described as groans.

Their putrid smell filled my nostrils.

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<sup>1</sup> An archaic phrase for the crown prince of Japan.

I had been raised in a relatively neat and proper place; also, I was still feeling a bit of trauma from when my mother had shown me her decaying body... so I was pretty sensitive now to grotesque things like this.

I felt terror run through my body as I began to scoot backwards.

"Kyaahhh!! Kyaahh?! W-Why did I suddenly get tossed into a zombie arcade game or something?!"

I was in the business district of some town I didn't recognize.

I saw many tall buildings around me stuck into the ground like stakes.

There was very little nature to be found, and the air was clouded with pollution.

Most of the trees lining the roadside were bent or snapped, and a huge number of cars on the roadside were either turned upside down or on fire.

It was like the end of the world.

It may also be the direct aftermath of a huge earthquake.

I also saw quite a few wounded priestesses collapsed around me.

These are... spiritualists from the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

It seemed they were still alive, but not a single one of them was moving at all.

".....?"

My mind became clearer, but along with that came a sense of unease that spread throughout my body.

It almost felt like... I wasn't myself right now.

-

"What is the matter, Tsukuyomi Juju?"

-

Somebody... was calling out to me, but it was with *my mother's name*.

"Weak irregularities such as this should be no match for you. Pick up your weapon and fight. A one-sided battle makes for quite a boring one, wouldn't you say?"

I saw someone beyond the flock of zombies standing on top of a street lamp.

His face was shrouded in shadow under this ominous, cloudy sky, so I couldn't see him very well.

He was dressed like he was the leader of some heretic cult, and I saw a few nasty-looking skulls dangling from his staff.

His body was so thin it was almost skeletal, while his eyes had sunk into his face.

He was missing a few teeth...

He was also balding...

Atop that balding head of this old man rested a diadem. It looked like something pilfered from some ancient ruin somewhere.

The sinister aura emanating from this man filled the air around the squirming zombies. I swore it made their stench a hundred times worse.

"You have annihilated all of our organization's vanguard troops, so come and show me your true power! Tsukuyomi Juju, the priestess of that vile Tsukuyomi Shrine, and the one heralded as the strongest priestess in history... you will take that power of the Supreme God which you inherited into your body, and you will hand it over to the people of Arahabaki!"

Arahabaki...?

What the hell was that?

But that name did kind of ring a bell...

More importantly, now I definitely had confirmed that this skeletal man had called me "Tsukuyomi Juju."

"....."

I took another good look at my own body.

I saw myself wearing a priestess uniform, slightly discolored by rotting flesh and blood (not my own).

Long locks of hair obscured my view... hair that was way too long to belong to me.

I was also bigger than I remembered... I was in an adult's body.

Through deductive reasoning, I could guess that I was... I was now in *my mother's body*.

Why?

Also, where exactly was I?

What was happening?

I must've looked quite confused. But the skeletal man seemed to see this as a good thing and began laughing uproariously.

"You do seem a bit off today, but do not think I will show you any mercy because of that! I am an assassin of the sinister occult society, Arahabaki! I am the vessel for a divine spirit, the Slothful Patron of Graves, Baron Samedi! Today will be the day where I avenge the deaths of all my fallen comrades!"

Baron Samedi was a deity worshipped in the folk religion of Voodoo.

Well, he was more of a saint than a deity, but close enough.

This deity was in charge of the passage between the border of life and death, and during festivals was allowed to ascend to the human world above. At those times, he would revive the dead and participate in boisterous merrymaking.

Why was a deity from such a distant land here all of a sudden?

"If I can defeat the Tsukuyomi priestess, then my own status will skyrocket! It may even be possible for me to become the vessel of the Eternal Rebel Arahabaki in Her Highness's place!"

This Baron Samedi or whatever trembled with emotion.

"Go, my zombies! Tear that woman into shreds and turn her into fish food!"

"Eek..."

Zombies were usually pretty weak enemies in games.

However, I had no idea how to fight, so even running here was a pretty difficult path to take.

These zombies seemed to be unarmed and just attacked by grabbing onto their prey. I cowered.

*Sasami, step down.*

Suddenly, I heard words in the back of my head, and I felt my consciousness sink deep into my body.

*This is not a place for children.*

In my mind, another psyche emerged...

"Do not think that the power of the Supreme God I have inherited is just for show!"

It was my mother.

This air of intimidation...

This imposing presence...

She quickly drew her blade, unsheathing the Totsuka-no-Tsurugi from her staff.

This blade made from divine energy cut through the surrounding zombies like butter, sending them flying from the impact.

"Hngh..?!"

Baron Samedi panicked a bit, raising his staff and calling out to his army of living corpses.

"It seems you are back to normal... my zombies, do not let that woman near me! She may be the Tsukuyomi priestess, but she is still a mere human! She will tire! Surround her and crush her!"

"Tch, how troublesome..."

My mother muttered to herself as she easily sliced the surrounding zombies into ribbons.

"These are the living dead. The dead belong to the Underworld. The Underworld is not under the control of the Supreme God Amaterasu. It may be rather difficult to cast an alteration and render these zombies all powerless."

So instead, my mother directly confronted Baron Samedi.

"What is your goal?" My mother asked bluntly.

"You members of Arahabaki generally take glee purely in making people suffer through your crimes, but this time I cannot confess to understand your actions.

Why would you force the dead to move and attack others? Is there a meaning to that? It does not even seem you have directly brought back the souls of the deceased, but rather, you have possessed these corpses with low-level gods and are controlling them by those means... however weaklings such as these cannot possibly give you any significant advantage in a real battle."

"Kufufu, you do not understand, do you? You do not understand my sublime aspirations!"

Baron Samedi twirled his cultist clothing in the air and spoke booming.

"Just as you said, I have merely possessed these corpses with lowly gods, and they are nothing but my puppets! However, these puppets will move at my command and will never betray me!"

Samedi spoke booming, but he made zero sense.

"My goal is the conquering of this nation! First, I will kill all the country's politicians, possess them with gods, and turn them into zombies! Then I will control these newly-born *zombie politicians*, and I will become the grand king! If other politicians defy me, I will kill them too and turn them into zombies! As for all the people who do not vote for me, they will also be killed and turned into zombies! Democracy demands majority votes! So if I turn all the politicians and all the people into zombies who have no way of disobeying me, then I will control everything! Zombie cabinet approval rating?! A hundred percent, of course! Guhahahaha!"

This guy was an idiot.

"Hmph, do not think I will allow you to do such terrible things!"

Wahh, my mother actually responded to that insane rant pretty sincerely. Mom, you're pretty cute...

"I see you have this quite planned out... by those means, certainly in a certain sense this land might fall under your control; however, the Tsukuyomi Shrine exists for the sake of this world, and for the sake of the humans in this world! We will put a stop to those ambitions! Gods and humans do not exist to be your playthings!"

My mother declared that and then took a familiar pose to cast a spell.

A cool-looking pose, like she was an ally of justice.

The Chant of Returning Roads.

"The Great God of the Returning Roads refers to the boulder placed at the boundary between Earth and Underworld to seal Izanami when she tried to escape from the Underworld! It has an instantaneous effect on the dead! To speak in words that may be familiar to you... return earth to earth, and ashes to ashes!"

Along with my mother's words, all the zombies around us fell to the floor, almost as if something above was pressing down upon them.

"Deity from another land, repent for your sins... and begone!"

My mother teleported herself to where Baron Samedi was standing.

She majestically swung the exposed Totsuka-no-Tsurugi down.

The blade ate into Baron Samedi's shoulder and quickly cut his body into two, dispersing it into the wind.

It was an instant kill.

The Slothful Patron of Graves, Baron Samedi, was by no means weak.

In fact, he had defeated all those other priestesses.

However, he was no match for my mother.

My mother was strong. Stronger than anybody.

She had to be.

Even if she had to do the impossible, even if she started coughing up blood, she had to put her all into it.

For the sake of this world. For the sake of the humans in this world.

"Wasting my time like that... hm?"

Breathing heavily, my mother suddenly looked up at the sky.

Something was flying towards us at high speeds, seeming to tear through the clouds.

"Juju-samaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

My mother squinted her eyes, seeing a strange thing flying through the sky.

It was the size of a car, but it looked like a huge human head.

This was a demon called a "flying head" youkai<sup>2</sup>, or a "long-necked" youkai (long-necked might make you think that it's a youkai that can stretch out its neck, but there were many types of this youkai that could detach its head and fly through the skies).

The Tsukuyomi Shrine used a lot of low-level youkai as servants.

The flying head soared towards us with the speed of an airplane, and I could see a single priestess sitting atop its head.

"That is... Micchan?"

My mother stared upwards, a hint of puzzlement in her eyes.

The flying head suddenly looked like it was holding something in.

"A... A... A... Acchooo!" It let out a grand sneeze.

The force of the sneeze threw this Micchan priestess person completely into the air.

"U... Ugyaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!!"

---

<sup>2</sup> Something like a Japanese mythological youkai. I'm pretty sure I've footnoted this before.

"Micchan?!"

Micchan began speeding towards the ground head first.

@@@@@

"Phew... that really scared me. I thought I was going to die."

"Normally, you would have. You should pay more attention in the future."

We were flying through the air.

We were atop this youkai that really just looked like the huge head of an old geezer. My mother was sitting in a formal Japanese style in the middle of a big bald spot, while Micchan was plopped down behind her looking quite miserable.

Earlier, Micchan had almost turned into Pie-chan, but my mother had kindly caught her (normally my mother's arm strength was close to nil, so she had probably used some alteration or something), and so, all was well again.

This perch atop this head seemed like it would be pretty uneasy, but my mother didn't budge an inch as she let out a sigh.

"You are quite helpless, so you should not be trying to control these youkai. They may have fallen from grace, but they are still gods, which means they are more powerful than humans and also of higher rank. When you try to control them, you must pay careful attention. They are like cell phones or bicycles - not everybody and everything can use them well."

"But, there's still a lot I really don't understand... these youkai are different from the divine spirits you hear about every once in a while, right? Umm, I can't really sort it all out in my head..."

"You certainly know very little... well, I suppose it cannot be helped. You are a bit special, after all."

Maybe she just wanted to kill time, but my mother began to explain things in a fairly sincere way.

"All things in this world are imbued with an ego, or a consciousness, or *something* like that which we can observe. This something is what we call a god, and, just as the name 'Myriad Gods' might imply, everything is a vessel to one of these gods."

"Yes, I know that much."

Micchan's hair fluttered in the wind as she nodded.

She didn't seem to be nearly as composed as my mother. This was evident as she was clinging to the youkai for dear life.

"We humans also possess gods in our bodies, and it's by using these gods that we can make many different kinds of miracles. That's where spiritual powers come from."

"Yes. Well, humans are in a rather unique position, but that explanation is more or less correct."

Micchan looked like she was around the same age as my mother, but somehow they gave off the impression of a teacher and her student.

Or maybe... of siblings.

"In any case, the gods are just the building blocks for the world. However, on some occasions they can *physically manifest themselves* as animals or humans or weapons or natural phenomena so as to exact their influence directly on the world. Of these physical manifestations, we capture the weak ones and subjugate them using our own spiritual abilities. These are what we are calling the 'youkai,' or familiars, or shikigami."

"I wish everyone would just agree on a word... it's so confusing..."

"That cannot be helped. Different places in this land... in the entire world... use whatever name they wish for these entities."

My mother let out a sigh before continuing her explanation.

"In the ancient times, all physical manifestations of gods were labeled as 'youkai.' However, now that we at the Tsukuyomi Shrine are working to create a world convenient for human life and enforcing the rules in a strict manner, these types of random manifestations are currently essentially nonexistent."

Ahh, so that's what it was like.

After my mother had died, the world stopped being "convenient for humans," so lately I've been seeing random youkai here and there.

For example, there were those low-level gods that Kagami had to exterminate back at Konohana Sakuya Academy earlier... I guess you could call them low-level youkai.

"And then, 'divine spirits' refer to those gods who have not physically manifested themselves."

My mother continued with her frank explanation.

"If you take humans as an example, then the divine spirit is the soul, or the psyche. Even as a divine spirit, one can affect change in things within its own territory, but without physically manifesting oneself and becoming a youkai, there are strict limits in terms of what one can do. This is why the old gods tended to physically manifest themselves frequently."

My mother groaned, a bitter look on her face.

"It seems that these people from Arahabaki controlled many of these divine spirits, and could use them to temporarily possess robots or dolls and control them as they wished."

"That's different from the youkai we use, right?"

"It is similar, but precisely speaking it is not the same. The possessed objects are fine-tuned by Arahabaki, and are machines that are programmed to never disobey their orders. They are easier to use than the youkai under our control, and as long as the divine spirit is intact, another object can be easily used even if the first one breaks."

"Ahh, I guess if you exterminate a youkai, then that's the end of it."

So, it was the difference between taking your own soul and allowing it to physically manifest itself... or taking a divine spirit and using it to possess a vessel that had been prepared in advance.

In the latter case, even if your body were broken, you would be able to survive.

However, the vessel could only move in the way Arahabaki had programmed it to move, so it didn't seem like you had much freedom.

"That is precisely why we can only use the lowest-level gods. Higher-ranked gods are carrying much of this world on their shoulders. Even if it is unlikely, if they happen to disappear, then it would be like gouging out a piece of the world. This world would stop functioning properly, and there is the danger that this may lead to the world failing altogether."

I see. For instance, suppose you controlled the god of the laws of physics.

If that god was extinguished, then the laws of physics themselves would vanish from this world.

It's not like the world would suddenly just be destroyed from that, but it would certainly be a pretty big problem.

"However, Arahabaki possesses vessels that can be freely thrown away, the zombie bodies. With these, they can use great numbers of gods as weapons and just toss the vessels away without worry when they are finished. As long as the divine spirits themselves are intact, there will be no impact upon this world."

Allow me to make an inference here.

The power of the Supreme God that was passed down by the Tsukuyomi priestesses was probably a divine spirit.

Tsurugi had entrusted Ninigi-no-Mikoto with a divine spirit that contained the power of the Supreme God.

After that, the remains... the dredges left after that process... that's what physically manifested itself as one of these "youkai," and that was what we knew today as Yagami Tsurugi.

Tsurugi had been planning to take the power of the Supreme God back at some point, so she had left her own heart and being within the part that was Yagami Tsurugi, and made it so that she could call the divine spirit she had left to Ninigi-no-Mikoto back whenever she wanted... or something like that.

As I was thinking about all these things, I suddenly heard my mother whisper.

"Hm. It seems we have arrived. Please hold onto me so you do not suddenly start falling once again."

"Okay~~."

Micchan smiled and boldly wrapped her arms around my mother from behind.

"Now I feel super safe~~."

Ugh, so not fair... Micchan, that's not fair at all.

I can count the number of times I got to hug my mother like this on one hand...

@@@@@

The Tsukuyomi Shrine.

This was the organization that existed to create a world which was convenient for humans, a place that worked to cleanse the world of all irregularities and wild youkai.

My mother passed under the torii gate while paying a brief sidelong glance at the well-maintained fence.

She hurried up the shrine road, not even looking at the hall of worship or the main shrine as she headed straight for the innermost building.

"This way, Juju-sama!"

Micchan was leading my mother somewhere, moving quite swiftly in that priestess outfit of hers (even though it looked really hard to move around in).

The Tsukuyomi Shrine was hidden from the world and protected by spiritual barriers, so there were no worshippers here, let alone any sightseers. It was as silent as death.

Even the birds couldn't be heard here. In the midst of all that, Micchan began to mumble anxiously.

"I wasn't sure who could be listening, so I couldn't say this before, but... please do not be surprised, Juju-sama. It seems Sasami-sama has collapsed..."

"Sasami?"

Me?

"I suppose this is not surprising given the circumstances. That girl has always had a weak body. Everyone is also so overprotective of her, and her immune system has suffered as a result. Lately, she has also been traveling down to the town, so it is possible she has also contracted a strange illness that does not yet exist within this sanctuary's walls. This all is her own fault, so I must admit that a part of me believes it would be better for her if we just leave her be."

My mother was quite a strict person.

"T-That could be true, but..."

Micchan seemed shaken, and the ends of her eyebrows drooped.

"But, Sasami-sama is a precious child who will become the next Tsukuyomi priestess. Also, all of our doctors and priestesses have already attended to her, and she still doesn't seem to be getting better... this might be the work of a god with evil intentions or a curse cast by some other organization."

"Whether it is an illness or a curse, the fact that Sasami collapses so easily is a sign that she lacks in discipline. Although, it would be unfortunate if she were to die. Where is she?"

"Over here, Juju-sama!"

Micchan led my mother down a hallway in the estate that served as the living quarters of the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

She finally arrived at a small, Japanese-style room.

This room filled me with a sense of nostalgia. It was my old room.

In accordance with my mother's policy that materialism was evil, there were very few personal belongings in the room.

The floors were composed of simple tatami mats, there were no windows, and the entire place felt quite claustrophobic.

"You may leave, Micchan."

My mother waved Micchan off while looking at the young me sleeping in a futon in the middle of the room.

"If this is not a mere disease, but a curse, then someone with very little spiritual ability like yourself may be in danger."

"Okay... Juju-sama, please be careful..."

Micchan looked a bit vexed as she was left on guard duty in the hallway while my mother entered the room.

My mother knelt by my younger self's side. There was a towel resting on my forehead. Maybe I had a high fever or something?

My mother's fingers hovered in midair for a bit as if she was handling something incredibly fragile.

"M-Mom...?"

My younger self's consciousness seemed to be rather hazy, but I lightly opened my eyes and spoke up.

My mother gave a small nod and just scooted closer to me without uttering a word.

However, I knew exactly how many emotions were swirling under that calm facade.

My mother possessed the power of the Supreme God, and so she always had to hide her emotions as much as possible and behave in that inhuman way.

My mother was strong.

That's why I loved her so much.

She was forced to seal her emotions, but somehow, somewhere her kindness came through even if it was a bit awkward. She was a very straightforward person like that.

"I'm... sorry..."

I let out labored breaths as tears leaked from my eyes.

"Mom was in the... in the middle of something... but I..."

"Enough."

My mother barely managed to squeeze those curt words out.

"I am the Tsukuyomi Priestess, but I am also your mother."

This was the cause of my mother's eternal grief.

She might want to abandon her duties, run to her daughter's side, and hug her close.

However, she would never be permitted to do that.

*She would never be allowed to prioritize her daughter above the world.*

My mother was too serious and very strong, and that's precisely why she was so pained.

She would take on all the pain in the world and would not show any of that pain on her face.

That is why people misunderstood her, resented her, hated her.

But I loved my mother.

I was the only one who wanted to be with my mother.

"Sleep."

My mother reached out with trembling fingers and softly stroked the top of my head.

"You should not worry about a thing. Leave everything to your mother."

My mother said that without even a hint of a smile, and then put a hand up to her mouth.

She turned around and softly coughed.

And then, crimson splashed her outstretched palm!

However, the young me's consciousness was so dim that I didn't notice.

My mother's posture didn't falter, and she behaved just like her usual dignified self, pretending nothing had happened.

"Sasami. Quickly grow big. That is the one thing you can do, and when you become an adult, the world will have become a slightly better place."

"Yeah. I know. Mom is trying really hard."

But despite saying that, I didn't really know much.

At the very least, I didn't want to become a burden to my mother.

"I will... be fine. I'm sorry for causing trouble. For being weak..."

"Do not apologize. You are not to blame. Being weak is not a sin. It is your mother who is foolish, as she cannot change this world in which the weak like you can be wounded thusly. But your mother will not apologize either. She will simply continue to do her best."

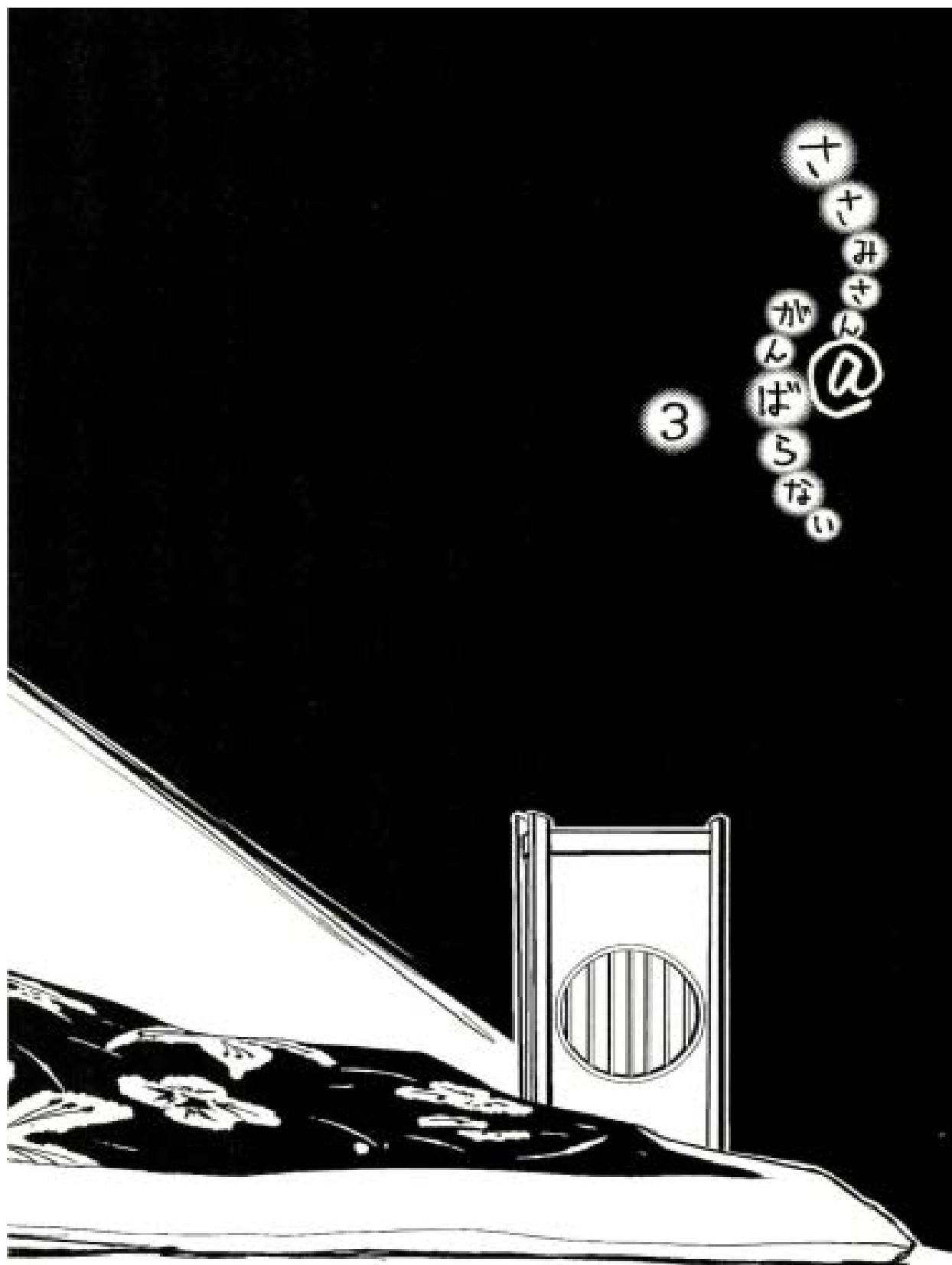
At the end of her words, my mother touched her cheek to my forehead.

With that, my mother seemed to have managed to shake off her lingering emotions, and she briskly stood up.

She was the Tsukuyomi Priestess, who had to work for the sake of this world, for the sake of the humans in this world. She couldn't just spend all her time tending to her daughter.

But, if that was really such a sin, then what was my mother to do?





**Chapter 8: Fossil of Mother and Daughter**

It was evening on the same day.

After my mother finished dealing with all matters concerning the sinister occult society Arahabaki and the Slothful Patron of Graves Baron Samedi (filing paperwork, healing wounded priestesses, recharging charms, etc.), she began walking through the Tsukuyomi Shrine grounds.

My mother's job was to use the power of the Supreme God to construct a world that was convenient for humans to live in.

To achieve that end, she would close her eyes, look down at the world from a God's-eye view, and create many alterations.

From the side, it might've looked like she just didn't care about anything and was just loitering around.

However, everyone in the Tsukuyomi Shrine knew the truth.

The truth was that in this shrine... no, in the entirety of Japan... my mother was trying harder than anybody else.

What she was doing was incredibly draining, but she didn't let out a single yawn as she walked around the Shrine with her back nice and straight.

Suddenly, she stopped.

"Stop moving around so restlessly like that."

My mother seemed to be muttering to herself, but I suddenly saw my brother appear in response to my mother's call.

He was a small boy, standing in the dim darkness and wearing all black.

He didn't look like someone who should be standing in a holy sanctuary like this... he looked more like a zashiki-warashi<sup>1</sup>, or a ghost.

"A puzzling creature you are..."

My mother walked to my brother's side and seemed to be trying to figure him out.

"I acknowledge that you mean no harm, but if you do happen to bring misfortune upon this shrine... no, upon this land, then I shall crush you immediately."

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<sup>1</sup> A classical Japanese youkai who generally looks like a 5-6 year old child with bobbed hair.

My brother continued looking blankly at my mother.

He seemed like a simple-minded boy (I guess a crueler person might call him stupid), and my mother let out a sigh.

"I feel no pity for you, and no sympathy. However, I do hope that one day you will find salvation..."

"I..."

My brother began to answer slowly.

"I'm pretty happy with my position here... with my fate."

"I see. Then I will say nothing more."

My mother turned her gaze away from my brother and slowly began to walk down the hallway.

"I'll go back to nursing Sasami-san then."

My brother gave a quick, neat bow and then also left.

My mother suddenly looked over her shoulder, watching my brother's back retreat through half-lidded eyes.

"He has appeared, which means Sasami has chosen... or perhaps I am approaching my own limits..."

*Growl.*

At that point, a dull sound came from my mother's stomach, interrupting her serious thoughts.

"I seem to be hungry..."

My mother continued showing no emotion as she lightly looked down.

"No, a Tsukuyomi Priestess must be free from selfish desires. She must persevere through all personal wants, and must clear her mind and hea-"

*Grrrrrowll.*

"Hm..."

My mother wandered around the shrine, making her way to the kitchen that looked out on the building's backyard. She poked her head in through the wide-open kitchen door.

@@@@@

Inside the kitchen was the same Micchan as before, who was now donning an apron while cooking.

She was probably making dinner for all the people living at the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

This was a huge load of work, but Micchan seemed to be having fun, and was even humming.

My mother stood by and watched for a while before quietly speaking up.

"Micchan, when will the meal be ready?"

"Uwah, hahh?!?"

Micchan almost dropped the pot she was holding as she hurriedly turned around and began bowing profusely.

"W-W-W-Why are you here, Juju-sama? Did you need something?"

"There is no need to be alarmed. Be at ease. It was my fault for interrupting your work."

My mother roamed around the kitchen, opening the lids on pots while picking at and taste testing some of the food that was lined up. She was acting surprisingly bad-mannered.

"Umm, okay. Excuse me then..."

Micchan returned to her cooking, seeming a bit puzzled.

"But this is quite a rare sight, Juju-sama. I've never seen you down here."

My mother was a big shot so she never participated in the chores and other small things around the shrine.

"The food will be ready soon, so just wait a bit longer."

"Understood."

My mother nodded at Micchan's words and then cheerfully moved to one of the corners of the kitchen. She plopped herself down.

If my mother were a dog, right now it was like she had been told to "wait" and was sitting there wagging her tail.

Exactly how hungry was she?

"Umm... if you stare at me like that, it's a bit hard to work..."

"However, I would be of no use to you in the kitchen. Most of the other priestesses have been wounded, and so I cannot engage in my normal duties until they have recovered. The incident earlier today has also been settled completely, and so to be honest, I am quite free. Please just think of me as a potted plant."

"You're my superior here, the person who raised me, and also the most important being in Japan, who has the power of the Supreme God. It's really hard to think of you as a plant..."

Micchan seemed to be at a bit of a loss before clapping her hands.

"Ah, Juju-sama. Should I make some porridge for Sasami-sama?"

"Hm?"

My mother cocked her head to the side as if this idea had never occurred to her.

"Porridge...?"

"When Juju-sama caught a cold, I also made some for her."

"Hm. That soppy soup, then? That was quite delicious. Certainly, it may be a good idea to provide Sasami with something easy to digest. Okay, Micchan. You can make some."

"No no, not me. Juju-sama should make some for Sasami-sama."

"Hm? But I cannot cook."

"I'll teach you! When it comes to things like this, I think Sasami-sama too would prefer it if she got porridge handmade by her mom."

"Is that so...?"

My mother stood up, looking a bit troubled. Micchan chuckled.

"Sasami-sama really loves her mom. She'll definitely be ecstatic. Well, it's not like I'm that knowledgeable about mother-daughter relationships... so I can't say for sure."

"You were spirited away, after all."

My mother muttered as she stood in front of the gas burner in her priestess outfit.

"You come from a truly esteemed family lineage that has served the Tsukuyomi Shrine from antiquity and were born with a tremendous amount of spiritual ability. An evil god discovered this and kidnapped you. All your spiritual abilities were sucked out and taken from you, and after many months and many years you finally found your way back to this world."

"Yes. My spiritual abilities were all gone, but Juju-sama still took me in and allowed me to help with the chores at the shrine. I am truly grateful."

Micchan let out a cheerful smile and seemed to stare off into the distance.

"That evil god ended up taking everything from me. Memories of my parents, my true name... well, it's all recorded somewhere, but none of it feels *real* to me. I'm also completely worthless as a priestess here..."

Her eyes seemed to pierce through me as I lay inside my mother, seeing this vision of the past flash before my eyes like a dream.

"So, I understand all too well what Sasami-sama might be going through."

Micchan put a hand up to her chest and continued.

"Of course, I had my spiritual powers taken from me, but Sasami-sama is just young and untrained, so we're different. But I understand how insecure it makes you feel to see how much more talented everyone is around you... how driven into a corner you might feel..."

These words, spoken by a kind adult in the far past, lent me encouragement in the present.

"It is hard to not be able to measure up to your ideals. You try, you try, you clench your teeth and try some more, but you never can get anywhere. You don't have enough time... enough training... enough talent. You might be earnest, you might be trying your best, but that makes it all the harder to take. When you feel like this, it's nice to have family at your side, supporting you, but Juju-sama and the shrine head are both very busy."

"Hm. Certainly, I do regret not being able to pay more attention to Sasami..."

I saw a fleeting look on my mother's face, a look I had never seen there even once before in my life.

"There is so much to do, and I never have enough time. Someday, I will have to leave my daughter in this hellish world, so I desire to purify it, to repair it, to bring peace to it, even if only a little. That is the only present I can give to my daughter. Even if she resents me for it, even if she feels abandoned because of it..."

My mother groaned; her face warped in pain.

"No... I constantly use that as an excuse and am always running away from that girl who has attached herself so closely to me. However, I am a priestess. I am the Tsukuyomi Priestess. I do not know any other life. I can never become a normal woman, a normal mother. Micchan, what is it that I should do...?"

"Juju-sama..."

Micchan's eyebrows drooped as she searched for words that might be able to cheer my mother up. But...

".....?!"

Suddenly, Micchan froze. She readied herself, and took out a number of charms from a bag.

"I feel a bad presence... Juju-sama, get down!"

It was right after Micchan yelled out.

The wall of the kitchen facing the garden in back cracked in several places, and not long after, something smashed through the entire wall.

Pieces of wood and plenty of dust flew everywhere as a huge boulder flew into the kitchen.

No, it wasn't a boulder. It was a huge hand made of boulders. It was almost unnatural how elaborately crafted that hand was.

The boulder hand formed a fist and slammed into Micchan, who was quickly sent flying.

She soundlessly rolled across the floor before hitting the wall hard. She fell still, blood dripping from her forehead.

@@@@@

"Micchan?!"

My mother panicked, summoning her own weapon - her golden staff - out from midair.

My mother looked out at the garden behind the Tsukuyomi Shrine, beyond the cracked wall.

And then, she gasped because she saw a sinister monster there, a monster that should never have been able to set foot beyond the powerful barriers that protected the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

It was giant, five meters tall, and completely made of rock.

*A golem.*

That word immediately came to mind.

The rock giant looked down at my mother, steam gushing out of various places on its body.

Immediately my mother noticed something.

"You bastard...!"

On that giant's forehead was buried a girl... it was the young me, Tsukuyomi Sasami.

I was embedded there, completely motionless, looking like a fossil that had been halfway excavated.

It was like I was in the midst of being eaten by this rock giant.

The young me didn't seem to be conscious... I couldn't remember something like this ever happening either.

The giant had probably kidnapped me and taken me in while I was in a deep sleep.

A red-hot aura of anger began to emanate from my mother's entire body.

"Maggot! Release my daughter!"

My mother roared out, but what answered her was the seductive voice of a girl mocking her.

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"Ke ke ke! Oh my, I apologize, but I cannot do that!"

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The giant's body shook as he shrugged his shoulders with much more skill than a clumsy frame like that should be able to muster.

"This girl here is my lifeline. If I release her, then I can already see you chopping me up! Ke ke ke! I am quite a weak god, you see... I must take a hostage like this, or I would certainly be terrified! And of course I would never be graced with an audience with the Tsukuyomi Priestess!"

"Identify yourself!"

My mother bellowed, even as the air around her warped from her anger.

"How did you penetrate the strong barrier that surrounds this shrine?!"

"Hm? There was no need to do such a troublesome thing such as that."

The girl's voice was filled with mirth.

"This girl here, she likes to go wandering around the town, does she not? It would be impossible to break into the Tsukuyomi Shrine, but the town outside is quite a different story. The Slothful Patron of Graves, Baron Samedi caused quite an uproar outside and lured you all out. Then, this girl came out to play in the town, which is when I possessed her, and that is how we found ourselves here."

The voice sounded quite proud of itself.

"The rest was quite simple. Lying inside this girl's body, I was not detected by the barrier of the Tsukuyomi Shrine nor by the other priestesses, and I successfully infiltrated your shrine. Even in the *original timeline*, nobody noticed my presence at all."

Original... timeline...?

My mother's face darkened at those words.

"What... are you saying...?"

"Oh my, but I was not talking to *you*."

The voice continued in a singsong tone.

"You are here, are you not? *Tsukuyomi Sasami*."

*Throb.* My mother's body shook.

I felt myself, who had been forced into dormancy by my mother's strong will, who had been seeing this dream of the past... I felt myself suddenly pushed to the surface.

"What are you? What... are you...?"

I felt my fear grow as I squeezed that question out.

"Do not look so worried. I came all this way to strike a deal with you."

The golem spread its arms out in a false sign of courtesy.

"I have laid in hiding for years in order to bring this advantageous proposition to you, waiting for the right time. I have come as your messiah. Well, depending on the circumstances, you could also call me a *time bomb*."

And then, she finally identified herself.

"I am an assassin of the sinister occult society, Arahabaki. I am a vessel for the divine spirit Tamamo-no-Mae, the One who Dances on the Scales. My abilities are the implantation of myself into spiritualists, and the alteration of history."

And then, she uttered words I didn't understand, but words that were oddly tantalizing.

"You there. Have you ever wanted to *change the past*?"

**Chapter 9: Parent-Teacher Conference**

The pale-faced, golden-furred, nine-tailed fox.

A beautiful siren who appeared frequently in China, India, and Japan in order to trick the politicians of the age.

A powerful monster who overturns the government of one nation half for sport before reincarnating in a new nation and perpetrating the same offense.

In Japan, she was known as Tamamo-no-Mae.

In the past, she was chased into a corner by exorcists, forced to reveal her true form and had her spiritual powers chipped away from her. She personally chose to then transform into the Killing Stone<sup>1</sup>, a rock that spews out curses and poisonous gas. Even though her actions were then effectively sealed, she has been able to continue killing massive numbers of living creatures to this day.

She was definitely not the kind of god who would be worshipped for protecting the land or helping things work, but rather, she was a vile monster who perpetrated various evils by skillfully ensnaring or just possessing people of influence.

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<sup>1</sup> This thing actually exists, in the Tochigi prefecture at a hot spring resort.

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"Ke ke ke ke!"

This god, the self-proclaimed Tamamo-no-Mae, was running rampant as she let out a high-pitched, fox-like cackle.

This huge random assortment of rocks first began to crush the walls and pillars of the building in its way and reached out for me. It quickly grabbed onto me.

Held in the giant's grip, I was fished up into midair like a piece of wood.

"Ugh..."

I felt like I was getting crushed and sharp pains ran through my body, but more than anything, I was just frustrated.

If this body's true owner were here... if my mother were here... she wouldn't have been done in this easily.

"There. Now we can talk more easily, no?"

Tamamo-no-Mae began to talk to me in that shrill, annoying voice of hers.

"By the way, this huge rock monster is a Killing Stone Golem I put my heart and soul into designing! It is a giant spiritual robot that can make mincemeat out of even the most powerful of gods! My divine spirit - my true self - may have fallen into ruin after long battles with other spiritualists, but that does not mean it is something to be neglected and tossed away, correct? The power of the pale-faced, golden-furred, nine-tailed fox is not to be trifled with!"

Purple-colored steam leaked out from many places on this Killing Stone Golem's body.

"I know your weakness all too well. You may possess the immense power of the Supreme God, but to use it you must retain your consciousness. If the Tsukuyomi Priestess falls unconscious, or if her awareness grows hazy, then she will not be able to properly exhibit her power."

That was certainly true.

The Tsukuyomi Priestess was always drugged so she couldn't alter the world too much.

My "sarcoma" also was meant to support me when I was sleeping or knocked out.

This enemy really had good knowledge of our weaknesses.

"Do not take me for a fool who would just attack the Supreme God for an entire country head on. So, please allow me to haze your mind and seal your ability to properly wield your powers! Bewitching and melting the hearts of statesmen is the nine-tailed fox's specialty, after all!"

I remembered back to the time I had betrayed my mother, and she had inserted those drugs into my stomach.

A similar substance was gushing out from the Killing Stone Golem's body.

Suddenly, I felt my consciousness slipping away, and my mind blanking.

"I have been waiting for *this moment* to come for so long."

Tamamo-no-Mae's words sunk into my mind as my consciousness continued to haze.

"It has been a mere ten years since I used Baron Samedi as a decoy and possessed you when you came to the town to play, hiding in your body."

She was a complete parasite.

Had she really been nesting in my body for so long?

Escaping the detection of the other priestesses, of my mother, and even of my sarcoma...

And waiting for the perfect opportunity to surface...

"Waiting for the time when you might want to change the past."

The sounds of the rock golem's limbs cracking ceased, replaced by an ominous laugh.

"I was in a state of living death but was awoken by your wishes. I will implant myself into your immense power of the Supreme God, forcing it to obey my will in order to cast an alteration on the past."

She could implant herself into spiritualists, and alter the past.

"Those are my abilities, but altering history requires no small amount of power. My own powers are in ruin, so it is impossible for me. If I do not channel the power of the Supreme God for my purposes, it would be exceedingly difficult."

"Casting alterations... onto the past... changing history..."

I groaned.

"That's taboo. That's... you can't do that..."

"Ke ke ke!"

Tamamo-no-Mae's laughter cracked through the air, almost as if she had just heard a hilarious joke.

"Were you not listening? I am part of a *sinister* occult society! We commit crimes that would shock even crying children into silence. We do it *because* it is taboo and *because* we cannot! And do not forget, *this is something you yourself wished for.*"

Yes.

She had mentioned that her awakening was brought about by my own wishes.

In that case, what had been the trigger?

"Tsukuyomi Sasami, you are *feeling regret*. And regret is frustration at failures in the past. Normal human's regret is meaningless and has not a single effect on the world. However, you possess the power of the Supreme God, which controls the laws of nature, the hearts of humans, and even the history of this land. When you feel regret, you warp the very fabric of time and space, and can even alter the lines of history."

I admit, I had some knowledge of things like this.

The alteration of history.

They say that history is written by the victors, who rewrite and stamp out any unflattering pieces of it.

For mere humans, that was all they could do.

For gods though... for the Supreme God... the alteration of history was more complete, more perfect.

The Supreme God could distort people's memories and what was once strict reality.

So, the Supreme God could also warp history and revise the past.

Things that definitely happened would be transformed into fiction.

Everything else would be patched up so events remained consistent.

It was a terrifying power.

A power that could send chills down your spine.

"Sure, I regretted things."

That was precisely why I tried so hard, so desperately to resist the urge of using that power.

"Back when I shut myself in that dark room all by myself, I thought about this a lot. Yeah, I regretted things. I betrayed mom. I broke my promise, and even though my mom had already died once, I couldn't lay her back to rest peacefully. I was a terrible daughter. I'm probably the worst Tsukuyomi Priestess in history. *But, that is still me.*"

I clenched my teeth at the pain attacking my entire body as I glared at the stone monster in front of me.

"I ran from my duties and will definitely bring about the end of the Tsukuyomi bloodline. I betrayed my mom, betrayed my ancestors... but *that is me!* No matter how much we warp history, no matter how much we change the past, no matter how much the people in the world claim that what I did was right and just..."

I wouldn't give myself into temptation, no matter how sweet.

I wouldn't just erase what happened in the past.

These sins were my own to bear.

I may regret things, and it may hurt, but this betrayal was fully my own.

Something I myself committed.

Forgetting something like that would've been the most cruel thing of all.

*"I would still never forgive myself."*

This was the only remaining way I had to pay my respects to my mother.

It was the last way a betrayer and liar like myself could show her my strength.

I would live on with these wounds.

I would live on, clenching my teeth at the weight of my sins.

I was a bit tired and taking a short rest right now...

But once my tears had run dry, I would stand back up and walk forward once again.

Walk forwards on this path.

"Hmmm."

Tamamo-no-Mae seemed a bit bored.

"Quite the hypocrite you are. Or no, perhaps you are strong. Quite impressive then. I applaud you. They say that failure plants the seeds of success, but to wish to erase the past is quintessentially human! However, you won against temptation. Quite impressive, Tsukuyomi Sasami. However..."

The stone giant let out more poison gas, almost as if teasing me.

"*What you want is of no concern here.* You might yell and scream, but my powers allow me to force you to listen to me!"

The female fox laughed loudly, almost as if trampling down my opinions.

"The Killing Stone Golem never appeared here at this time before. Do you know what that means? It means the alteration of history has already begun! The minute you started to feel regret is the minute everything ended. I will use that regret, warp it, and then force history to be rewritten. *Rewritten in a way that is convenient for me, of course.*"

The Killing Stone Golem put more strength into its fingers.

I felt like I was being squeezed by a vice, and I heard my spine creaking.

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"I will kill Tsukuyomi Juju right here and now."

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Tamamo-no-Mae lightly made that declaration.

"That is the goal of altering history this time. If I can kill Tsukuyomi Juju here, then Arahabaki's natural enemy, the Tsukuyomi Shrine, will also weaken. We may then be able to save Her Highness, if only by a little."

A bit of sadness mixed with her voice as she grew quiet.

"If Juju dies, then where do you think the power of the Supreme God will go? Their clan is bound by blood through incest, so the natural conclusion would be to her daughter. And, as you can see, I have taken full and complete custody of Tsukuyomi Sasami's body."

I glanced at the young me who was embedded into the head of the giant.

"We kill Juju, and we eliminate our greatest enemy. At the same time, we kidnap the young Sasami, who has just acquired the power of the Supreme God and bring her back to Arahabaki. It will be a simple task to brainwash a young, inexperienced girl like Sasami and make her into our ally. And so, Arahabaki will have defeated a great enemy, will have taken the power of the Supreme God for ourselves, and will immensely grow from it."

Tamamo-no-Mae seemed to be having quite a bit of fun talking about her pipe dreams.

"Grow enough to conquer this entire planet."

Was that the ultimate goal of Arahabaki?

Conquering the world... if she was being completely serious, then yes, they were definitely an evil organization.

"Are you a moron...?"

I finally managed to get out an insult, even as the giant's fingers threatened to crush me.

"My mom was worked to death trying to manage this entire country."

I felt tears begin to flow.

"And I... I'm at my limit just taking care of this small, single body of mine."

They wanted me to manage the world...

Don't make me laugh.

"And someone like you...! Someone like you, who's only all smug because you used a nasty trick, what the hell do you think you can do?! You think you can kill people?! You think you can bring an entire country to its knees?! You think you can control the world?!"

"Is that all you wanted to say?"

Tamamo-no-Mae almost looked like she had pity in her eyes as she spoke in a kind voice.

"In that case, please die, Ms. Hypocrite-Who-Tries-So-Hard. You certainly said plenty of nice-sounding things here, but if you are looking for praise, then you should seek it from the gods in heaven above after your soul passes there."

@@@@@

It was right after that.

I felt like I had been enveloped in an explosion, and my entire body shook from the impact.

Ahh, did the Killing Stone Golem finally crush my body?

Sorry, mom... I couldn't keep myself alive...

That thought passed through my mind... but if I really had died, why hadn't my consciousness faded out by now?

I opened both my eyes.

-

"Hey there. Nice work."

-

I saw Yagami Tsurugi, squatting and looking down at me with a laid-back look in her eyes.

".....?"

I didn't understand what was going on, and could only stare back at her in utter confusion.

I was no longer in the back garden.

Instead, I was in a room that was already deeply etched into my memory.

I remembered the pattern on the flower pot in the corner.

The flickering flames of the hanging lanterns.

The charms lined up on the floor.

And the single futon laid out in the middle of the room... with my mother inside.  
My mother, who was approaching her death.

Yes, I remembered clearly now. This was the time of my mother's death.

This was her deathbed, and after her body failed her, she died soon afterwards.

I remember standing to her side and sobbing.

This was a painful memory. No matter how many times I thought back to it, I ground my teeth at my own helplessness, at how I couldn't do a single thing.

And now, I found myself right in the middle of that memory.

My cheeks were wet with my tears.

I was now in my younger body, wearing my priestess clothes, and I stared out in blank confusion.

And right next to me was someone who definitely should not have been here: Yagami Tsurugi.

She was in the same lab coat I often saw her in at school and looked like she didn't really want to be here. She yawned.

"Hey, 'sup? You okay? Alive and kicking?"

Tsurugi waved her hands in front of my eyes and called out.

I gulped and finally managed to squeeze some words out from my mouth.

"T-Tsurugi?"

"Yup. Can't you recognize the cute Tsurugi-chan when you see her? Hmm, I guess you're a bit curious what's going on... let's see... ugh, this is hard. Umm... geez, I'm pretty bad when it comes to teaching other people stuff."

Then why the hell are you a high school teacher?

-

"We do not have enough time to linger here idly."

-

As Tsurugi began to groan with a difficult expression on her face, my mother somehow rose from her futon.

She was supposed to be in critical condition here... she was going to die soon.

"M-Mom?!"

"Yes. I am here."

My mother nodded, her expression pained, before looking at me.

"Sasami, listen carefully. I cannot stay like this for long. Tamamo-no-Mae, One who Dances on the Scales, is a powerful god. She has also been preparing for this opportunity to exhibit her powers for a long time."

"O-Okay...?"

I still was completely confused, so I couldn't do anything but nod blankly.

My mother impatiently looked at me and spoke strictly.

"Hold yourself together, Sasami. In spiritual battles, it is always the one with a clouded mind that suffers defeat."

That was certainly true.

That's exactly why someone like me who was easily troubled and led astray was so useless.

"Listen to me. I will now use Tamamo-no-Mae's powers for myself in order to return to the past. You cannot hope to resist her powers, but there is a silver lining here in that *you are no longer alone*. We will combine our powers and stand up against this taboo alteration of the past."

"This woman... she was the one who poked a hole through your belly and shoved drugs in there, wasn't she?"

Tsurugi was rudely pointing at my mother.

"When she did that, she also inserted *her own vessel* in there when you weren't looking. So after she got beat to pieces by Tama and fell back into the Underworld, she used that vessel as a lifeline to come back to this world."

Her vessel... so it was like how Tsurugi left the divine blade Ame-no-Murakumo back in the human world so she could follow it back from the Underworld.

"I also cannot overly rely on my own abilities. There was always the possibility that I would fall back into the Underworld, and so I enacted that plan as a safety measure. Otherwise, I would not have recklessly caused injury to my daughter."

I see. If she only had to drug me, she wouldn't have needed to punch a hole into my stomach.

"So, was that why I got really really fat...?"

"Hm. Did you get fat?"

There was quite a bit of hope in my voice as I asked that question, and my mother fell into thought.

"Hm, that would be your mother's fault, yes. I will provide a more detailed explanation later, but it is difficult to regulate things in your world from the Underworld. I had envisioned that my vessel would appear as more of a boil or a pimple..."

Boils and pimples are really ugly too, mom...

And seriously, I was so panicked from being so fat that I almost brought Tama's arm down on myself to gouge out a part of my body.

"Ahh, thank goodness. It was mom's fault... I thought I would stay like that forever... I even used the power of the Supreme God but couldn't lose any weight at all, so I was going crazy."

"Of course it would be a nuisance if my vessel were to be destroyed, so I implemented certain safety precautions there as well."

Given her power, it wouldn't be hard for my mother to erect a barrier around her vessel.

I might possess the power of the Supreme God, but my spiritual powers were still underdeveloped, so if my mother put two or three layers of protection onto something, it would take me quite a bit of time to break through.

"Also, please do not use the power of the Supreme God for something like 'losing weight.' The only reason my vessel swelled past what should have been just a boil is because you are too lazy. If you showed more restraint and resisted your own material desires more effectively this would have never happened."

Ah, she's angry at me.

But for some reason, hearing mom scold me like this... it made me really happy.

"At any rate, I followed the vessel which had been implanted into your body up from the underworld... but on the way, this one here interfered."

My mother unhappily pointed at Tsurugi.

Tsurugi also seemed a bit astonished.

"You think I'd just let you run away from the Underworld over and over? I was also down there and was trying to get back when I had a run-in with this woman. Because of that, I could only get a random part of my powers back to the human world and I lost most of my memories too."

Ahh, so that's why Tsurugi was bugging out.

"But well, now we're all here in this mess. So before we start killing each other again, let's agree to a truce and join forces to deal with this Tamamo-no-Mae and her alteration of history."

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

"Well, I'm pretty damn exhausted though, and same with Juju here, so I don't think we can do anything outrageous right now."

"We cannot allow her to take over the world. Changing the past is an abominable act in the first place. Well, I suppose I do not have to tell *you* that."

My mother looked at me and quietly mumbled.

"Your words to Tamamo-no-Mae were quite stirring. I am proud of you. I cannot say that I forgive you for what you have done to me, but if you are acting with your own sense of conviction, then I do not consider you a traitor."

"Mom..."

I felt tears begin to leak out of my eyes, and I frantically tried to wipe them away.

I thought I would never be able to face my mother again.

Of course, she didn't say she forgave me... but I felt a slight bit of weight ease off my shoulders.

"Well, looks like this is a good time for a parent-teacher conference."

Tsurugi chuckled.

"So, it looks like mom here has her reasons, and so does Sasami. You two should have a long talk later and start trying to figure each other out. From there you should be able to come to your own understandings about each other. Get along, mother and daughter... watching family hurt family gets pretty boring."

Tsurugi seemed a bit sad as she muttered that. But then she summed up the situation for us.

"Anyways, Tamamo-no-Mae uses regret, or any desires to *change the past* as a trigger for her powers. If we want to break her powers, we have to get rid of all those triggers."

Tsurugi spoke seriously and ominously.

"However, to Tamamo-no-Mae's surprise... well, to everyone's surprise, we have the minds of three people mixed together in this bodily vessel now: Tsukuyomi Sasami, Tsukuyomi Juju, and myself, Yagami Tsurugi. Because of that, her powers have misfired a bit, and we can use that gap to go in and interfere."

There was me, the original owner of this body.

There was my mother, who planted a vessel into my body in order to come back to the human world.

And there was Tsurugi, who was mixed up in everything after encountering my mother in the Underworld.

If we could eliminate our regret, or at least soothe it, then we could resist Tamamo-no-Mae's power.

"I'm gonna use Tamamo-no-Mae's power now, and we'll slowly go backwards in time. If we try to interfere in past events we'll end up altering the past, but if we just watch there shouldn't be a problem."

Tsurugi smiled teasingly.

"We can't start over from a save point but we can at least look through all the game history logs and figure out what we can do from here on out. You two should aim for a happy end. Life isn't as much of a shit game as you might think."

**Chapter 10: Until the Rising of the Sun...**

I felt a jolt, almost as if I had been punched in the face.

I couldn't tell left from right from front from back anymore, and while I was in this state of drunkenness, the world around me completely changed.

The first thing I felt was warmth on my cheek.

There was something burning right next to me.

"Like the fires of Kagutsuchi that burned Izanami to death, bright flames are both a useful tool and a dangerous monster if carelessly touched."

My mother's voice resonated through the air.

She was in her usual priestess outfit, with her spotless white robe, red hakama, and split-toed socks.

She swung a Shinto paper streamer<sup>1</sup> around in one hand and slowly walked.

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<sup>1</sup> [She is waving around one of these.](#)

She walked atop the flames.

"Our ability to use tools separates us from the animals. In order for humans to take their first step on the road to divinity, they must first conquer the monster that is fire. It is logical to say that fire burns, but spiritualists are able to bend logic to their will. You must thus master the noble ancient art of fire walking."

This place was familiar to me.

There were a couple training halls in the mountains of Kyuushuu, where the Tsukuyomi Shrine was situated.

The bodies of humans were not imbued with much divinity at all, so to be able to confront inhuman monsters and the gods, spiritualists had to undergo intense training to gain powers that surpassed those of normal humans.

As my mother walked atop the menacing flames, not a single scorch mark appeared on her priestess clothes.

Fire walking was actually a type of training that you frequently saw in various religions and martial arts.

However, fire walking usually meant you were walking atop heated stones or iron bars, or thrusting your hands into a pile of hot ashes before cooling them... literally walking atop flames was a difficult skill you only saw powerful spiritualists doing in tales of legend.

However, we were at the Tsukuyomi Shrine, and spiritualists at this shrine specialized in supernatural powers so they could help manage all of Japan. For them, they had to be able to do something like this with their eyes closed.

"Do not be afraid! After Kagutsuchi was conquered and defeated, many of the fundamental gods of creation were born from the ashes. Ihatsutsunoo, the god of minerals, Takemikaduchi, the god of lightning... *destruction gives way to creation!* So, chase yourself to the brink of death, and feel the power flow to you from gazing down into the abyss of destruction!"

I felt like I had just gotten thrown into the middle of a Dragonball episode...

"... To hear such arrogance from my own mouth..."

Suddenly, I heard a voice to my side.

Around me were crowded around a dozen new priestesses that my mother was training. They all looked terrified as they watched my mother walk across the fire.

Among that dozen was one who had her arms crossed and didn't look particularly happy.

"It is quite unsettling to be shown an image of yourself from a time long past."

"..... Mom?"

I softly called out to her, and she nodded.

"Are you over there, Sasami? It seems that our divine spirits - our souls - have separated from our bodies and are leading us back into the past. And we are then able to temporarily possess somebody there and move around like that. If we act too extravagantly, we may alter the past, but just talking like this should not cause any harm."

"Yo! You guys over there?! I'm here!"

There was a Tsurugi-like priestess smiling right next to me.

"... But geez, this is some pretty insane training. Being human sure is tough. What's the point of being able to walk on top of fire? I'd never be able to do it anyways. I'm pretty bad with hot stuff."

"Aren't you supposed to be the Sun Goddess...?"

I was a bit astonished at Tsurugi. At the moment, my mother turned to me looking rather pensive.

"Let me ask you once again, Sasami."

She looked me straight in the eyes.

"Admittedly, I was acting rather impatiently the other day. Of course, I needed to move quickly, as I would not be able to stay in this world for an extended period of time. No matter how much one says that distorting reason is the spiritualist's purpose, I deviated from the path too much. If I remained in this world too long, there was even the danger of me becoming a vengeful spirit like Sugawara-no-Michizane or Taira-no-Masakado."

I didn't really know how stuff like that worked, but...

I really had wanted to talk with my mother.

Once someone died, you would never be able to see them again.

But here I was talking to my mother again. It was a miracle.

My mother might have broken a terrible taboo and committed unforgivable crimes, but I was happy... and I didn't want to make her efforts go to waste.

Earlier, I had failed.

I was being overly stubborn and my mother was being overly impatient, which had led it all to end in tragedy.

I would not make the same mistake twice.

I had betrayed my mother, gotten depressed, and shut myself into my room...

After that, it was just like Tamamo-no-Mae had said: I had felt regret.

I couldn't forgive myself.

I felt terrible about how weak I was.

However, just curling up inside my futon and thinking about things for a long time wasn't going to solve anything.

It just made everything hurt that much more.

So...

"Mom, I... no matter how many times you ask, I'm not going to go back to being the Tsukuyomi Priestess."

"Yes, you have already said that."

My mother wasn't an impossibly stubborn person.

She was forward-thinking, a hard worker, and she was open-minded too.

"However, this is a precious power that we inherited from our ancestors. I cannot allow it to fall in the hands of someone with no motivation and who will not put it to good use."

She said that without hesitation.

"So, temporarily... as much as time permits, I would like to take charge of the power of the Supreme God."

Ahh, so that's what she wanted.

"The power of the Supreme God is passed on through incest. The swiftest way to pass the power on is to give birth to a child."

"But I refused when I was asked to have a child with dad."

My mother nodded.

"Yes. And if you refuse the standard methods of reproduction, then we must try different, even heretical methods. I remember the method that your 'sarcoma' used to take your power. It expanded your body, making you fat, before cutting itself off."

A part of my body was cut off and by itself formed a new being.

In Japanese mythology, this was quite a common occurrence.

Take the second Yagami sister, Kagami. The Supreme God Amaterasu had cut off one of the cursed parts of her body, and that cut-off part gave birth to Kagami.

"We will thus take such a piece of flesh and imbue it with the power of the Supreme God, along with the strong will that is needed to take care of such power - namely, myself. Myself, who has crawled up from the Underworld in order to complete such a task. In other words, I will be reincarnated within that flesh."

"Reincarnation, huh...?"

Tsurugi didn't look too enthused by that plan.

"Well, I guess that's better than that flesh being stolen away by an evil god at least..."

In the Shinto religion, without a leader to guide people, there were no absolute laws.

So there really wasn't originally anything fundamentally "taboo."

In other words, all the rules and restraints were *self-imposed*.

There were holy sanctuaries - shrines and such - where one could communicate with the gods, talk things out, and come to mutual understandings.

Everyone would find common ground, and set down vague, but flexible rules.

Instead of taking the correct route, Tamamo-no-Mae had used an underhanded trick by trying to alter history. It was a cowardly move.

This dialogue my mother and Tsurugi were having was very appropriate, and very much reflected the culture of this country.

Although, given the tragedy of Izanami trying the same thing,<sup>2</sup> Tsurugi couldn't easily forgive my mother's escape from the Underworld.

"Well, I'm pretty much retired now, so I'm not gonna raise a fuss either way."

The former Supreme God scowled and continued.

"But something like this hasn't been done before, and I can't really guess how all the other gods are gonna react. Sure, this isn't as bad as coming back from the Underworld, and I guess it really sounds like something pretty Japan-like. I mean, we gods have been doing stuff like this for ages. I'm talking about the old divination rituals where lots of new gods got born.<sup>3</sup> But we've gotta make sure we do it right, or the old man might get angry at me."

"We will have no choice but to beg forgiveness then."

My mother straightened her back graciously.

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<sup>2</sup> I believe we've seen mention of this myth before, but Izanagi and Izanami were the two founding gods of Japan. Izanagi went to the Underworld to try to save Izanami, but failed because she had already eaten the fruit of the Underworld. He runs out with her chasing after him and blocks the entrance with a huge boulder. Amaterasu (i.e. Tsurugi) is born from Izanagi purifying himself after the incident.

<sup>3</sup> Tsurugi mentions "Ukehi," which is a Shintoist divination ritual. Most famously, Amaterasu (i.e. Tsurugi) used it with Susanoo to determine the latter's intentions - if she gave birth to boys, it meant Susanoo harbored no ill intent towards her. And she proceeded to give birth to five boys.

"I have but a short amount of time in this body, so you will have to overlook this one instance. This would be a forced reincarnation as well. It is very likely that my newly birthed self will not be able to live for very long. However, even if it is only for a few years, I would be able to manage the power of the Supreme God for just a little while longer."

My mother had tried her very best, and offered me a stay of execution.

"Sasami."

My mother called out to me softly.

"In that time, you should decide. Decide the life you want to live and the future of this land. No matter what anybody else says, you are the current Tsukuyomi Priestess. You have a duty to shoulder this role that has been passed down since time immemorial. If you intend to abandon that role, then you should do so in good faith. Do not persist in giving in and fooling yourself into pretending that nothing is wrong."

As always, my mother was strict.

"What would you like to do with the power of the Supreme God? My thoughts on the matter have stayed the same. The world is changing, all borders are breaking down, and I cannot leave this land to the wild, rampant gods. We humans must thoroughly manage things, as we need the land to be bountiful and our defenses to be strong. That is why we need the Tsukuyomi Priestess, and a world that is convenient for humans."

"Sure, I guess the gods here aren't too reliable."

I wanted to just give her a simple, honest refusal.

"They're weak, never know what to do, failing at everything..."

Just like me.

"But, even so, it is not our place to build a huge fortress around everyone else and claim we're going to protect them. It's like we're building a zoo... the gods may be weak and lost and fail all the time, but that just means that they can get over their shortcomings and grow. And once they've accomplished this, won't that mean they've grown strong?"

I really couldn't put it into words well, but...

"It's hubris for humans to think they're the only ones who should try hard. Let's trust the god of this land more. Ever since Ninigi-no-Mikoto descended from the heavens, we've clapped a hand over our eyes and ears, forgetting to talk with the gods. We think that trapping all the kids in a pen and not letting them out is the same as protecting them. It's as if we're idiot parents."

I tried with all my might to find the right words.

"But, getting trapped in a room, in your futon... that's not paradise at all. Let's send them all into the big world outside. Let them go to school, into society, and even if they get hurt, they'll definitely get strong someday. They'll grow into adults. This is the end of the age of protection. I want to believe in the gods more."

For a long time, we had shut ourselves in the mountains and were carrying out our duties.

For the sake of this land.

For the sake of the world, and the humans living in that world.

We honed our skills, walked atop fire, and prepared ourselves to fight the battle alone.

But, that wasn't how things really should've been.

"We have only borrowed the power of the Supreme God temporarily, and are keeping watch over it. *This power does not belong to us.* Who are we to not understand that and think it's our right to protect everyone? We really don't have to try this hard for the sake of the world anymore."

So, I would no longer try.

None of us had to try anymore.

"I'm pretty useless and I always get tossed around by the power of the Supreme God. So, I'll give that power to mom for a while. In the meantime, I'll try to grow. I'll become strong to the point where that power can no longer crush me."

We had to bring an end to the night.

Under just the moonlight, the world would do nothing but slowly wither away.

"After that, I'll take the power of the Supreme God back. And then, I'll pass it to the being who is actually fit to manage this land: the next generation god and the Supreme God of the new era, Yagami Tama."

This was heavy baggage we were given when Ninigi-no-Mikoto descended to earth.

And I would give it back.

"Until Tama grows up, I'll watch over this power with mom. And that'll be that. All in all, the Tsukuyomi Shrine is to blame for being so desperate to protect this power for so long. We've had this immense burden for so long that we've forgotten why we got it in the first place."

"Is that really what you think?"

I didn't know if my mother was okay with what I said... but she began staring off into the distance.

"I received the power of the Supreme God by choice. Your grandmother was still alive, and I voluntarily underwent the proper rituals to become the Tsukuyomi Priestess. In your case, it was my untimely death that thrust this role upon you forcibly."

I could almost hear a hint of relief in her voice as she spoke kindly.

"And so, I assumed you were just spoiled. I assumed you just lacked discipline, and I made light of you. No, I was probably justified in thinking that before. However, through long contemplation, you reached this conclusion. You finally remembered our original purpose that was handed down to us during the era of gods, a purpose that not a single one of us has managed to fulfill."

My mother softly placed her hand atop my head.

"Your mother is proud of you."

And then, she awkwardly stroked my hair.

"I was the foolish one, the one that was mistaken..."

Tsurugi smiled at those words.

"Nah, you weren't wrong. You two just tried way too hard. Having to do this annoying job for all this time... seriously, good work. Seriously, I appreciate it."

Tsurugi then snapped her fingers and made an announcement.

"Well, it looks like we still have some time left. We came all this way, so why don't we have a look around?"

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We found ourselves flying through a swirling vortex, with all the timelines mixing together around us.

The three of us made sure to nestle close to each other so we wouldn't get separated as we traveled to the past.

I saw various scenes flashing before my eyes.

Some of these scenes were from my own past.

@@@@@

We were in the Production Club room at Konohana Sakuya Academy.

Whenever I felt like it, I would go to the clubroom to chat with the others.

Kagami was there, completely engrossed in an animal picture book.

Next to her, Tama was doing her homework with tears welling up in her eyes.

I was teaching Tama how to work with fractions after she had begged me for help.

Tsurugi and my brother both had apparently finished their work for the day and showed up to the room. We took out a pack of cards and everyone got wrapped up in a game of Millionaire.<sup>4</sup>

For some reason, this turned into a game of strip Millionaire, and everyone began to aggressively target my brother. He soon lost all his clothes and ran from the room completely naked with a death grip on the briefcase he was still using to hide his face.

*"What a happy happy life you all were leading..."*

*"Ehehe, right? Every day was really really fun!"*

*"Sasami, I'm pretty sure your mom is being sarcastic there."*

We talked with each other as we continued to leap across space and time.

@@@@@

Now I was looking at an image of me and my brother, just after we had escaped from the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

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<sup>4</sup> Very similar to the Western card game Asshole.

The scene felt much more lonely than the scene from the clubroom we had just watched.

My brother had found a job and a home for us, and he had finished putting our living space in order.

Meanwhile, I depended on my brother for everything and couldn't do anything myself.

I blamed myself for being so weak, but out of my own stubbornness couldn't tell my brother my honest feelings. I never thanked him, and everything just continued awkwardly.

I was sitting atop my bed in my spiritually barricaded room, hugging my knees.

I was probably getting crushed under the weight of my loneliness.

I couldn't get anywhere, and was just filled with regret and guilt at having run away.

Tears welled up in my eyes. But I suddenly felt the bed swell up as my brother came leaping in.

-- Kyaah?! Why are you in my bed?! How did you even get in here?!

-- Your oniichan is always right next to you, Sasami-san!! Just pretend that instead of one oniichan, you actually have thirty!

-- Shut up you cockroach! Get out! Also I'm hungry so go cook something!

My brother was a pervert, so I didn't have enough time to feel depressed.

That was probably what saved me.

*"I am curious. How exactly did Kamiomi find a job and a house?"*

*"No idea. I don't even think any records of us should've existed..."*

*"We just used alterations and managed that way. But Tsukuyomi... I dunno..."*

@@@@@

We went back to an even earlier memory.

A very young me was dressed in priestess clothes and gripping tightly onto a crayon, drawing a picture.

It was Mother's Day.

I had overheard from somewhere that such a holiday existed and was working hard so my mother would be happy.

I was planning on giving my mother a drawing of her.

Of course, I didn't really have much artistic ability, so it wasn't easy to tell whether I had drawn a human or a potato.

I went over and handed my mother the drawing, a look of happy confidence on my face. But my smile soon froze over.

-- Do not draw, Sasami. Creating art is evil. When humans create art, they pass their wishes into what they create. And the wishes of those with the power of the Supreme God can greatly distort the world.

I saw my portrait being ripped into two in front of my very eyes.

-- If you have time to play, then spend more time on your trainings and stop being such a failure.

My mother spoke those harsh words and I ran off, sniffing.

Things like this had happened time and time again.

*"Wait, wasn't that a bit over-the-top? You didn't have to rip it..."*

Tsurugi said that, but then...

In the now-empty hallway, we watched as my mother suddenly appeared.

She picked up the drawing which had fallen to the floor, and made it whole again by casting an alteration.

She stared at it emotionlessly.

-- Hm? Juju-sama? What are you doing over there?

Startled by the sudden voice, my mother quickly hid the drawing in her priestess clothes.

After that, we saw my mother put the drawing into a frame and hang it in her room.

*"Fufufufu, so you were actually pretty happy! You're always so emotionless so it was hard to tell!"*

*"I have undergone numerous training to control my emotions. Also, it is true that drawing and other forms of creative production are very dangerous. It is a mother's duty to scold her daughter before she develops any strange habits."*

*"I see I see... mom, you actually hung that picture up..."*

@@@@@

We went even further back.

To the scene of my birth.

My mother's face was flushed and she looked in pain as she was handed a baby.

She hugged it delicately as if she was handling something fragile.

I saw a rare smile on my mother's face.

I knew from seeing this that I had been a welcome addition to the family.

*"Hey, look look! There's some interesting stuff over here!"*

*"Uwah, ruining the mood like that... so, what is it? Oh, wow! It's mom! She's so young!"*

*"Hm. Your mother has always been young... geh, this is...! No! Do not look at that!"*

Pulled by Tsurugi's psyche, we found ourselves watching a different past.

@@@@@

I saw what was probably a teenage version of my mother with short hair, running around a field.

She pummeled a youkai with a single charm, trying to catch up to someone.

-- Wait!

My mother let out a sharp yell and released another charm.

A big pile of rocks crumbled, blocking any path of escape for my mother's prey...

It was a young, handsome boy. Actually, hey, this was my father when he was young, wasn't it?

My father shook, his face pale, as he readied his sword, the Totsuka-no-Tsurugi.

He howled out at my mother as she approached him through the cloud of dust.

-- Dammit! What does the esteemed next Tsukuyomi Priestess want with a failure like me?! You want to yell at me to train harder? To not go playing in the town? I'm tired of hearing all your lectures, *neesan*! And I'm tired of having to keep spending every day killing these dangerous monsters!

From how he said *neesan*, I inferred that my father had been my mother's younger brother.

Well, we were a family that survived through incest, after all.

My mother ignored my father's words, and slowly walked up to him.

-- Ruza.

She didn't have any emotion on her face.

-- I like you.

-- ..... Huh?

My father seemed utterly confused, and my mother looked down at the ground, her cheeks going redder and redder.

-- D-Die!

My mother threw a charm, blasting my father away.

*"Wow! Wow wow wow wow!"*

My mother was raising a fuss.

*"Do not watch! Stop! Do not watch the mistakes of my youth!"*

*"Wait wait! Come on, I just want to see a teeeeeny more!"*

*"Okay, let's go watch something else! Ah! Over there! Looks like it's what happens after this! Let's watch as the super serious prodigy and heir of the Tsukuyomi lineage @ Juju-chan chases after the delinquent dropout of the family @ Ruza, finds him in the town, and gets wrapped up in a boisterous romantic comedy...!"*

*"S. T. O. P! My youth was so filled with training that I was unversed in matters of love, and I acted like a complete fool... please stop watchingggg!!"*

@@@@@

Time continued to rewind.

My young mother was sitting on an altar.

She was the sheltered daughter of the Tsukuyomi tribe who was being raised properly to be the next Tsukuyomi Priestess.

That was my mother.

My grandmother was the current Tsukuyomi Priestess, but her body was weak and she collapsed often, so she rarely showed herself in public.

My mother feigned ignorance, not showing any hint of her brilliance as she remained absolutely silent.

Everyone else ignored my mother... or maybe they didn't care if a little kid heard them. They just continued to whisper.

Whisper about how much they were going to use the power of the Supreme God to advance their own interests.

About how much their personal coffers would swell, about how they were going to fulfill their every wish and indulge in pleasure.

Or about how they would defeat their rivals and rise up in the world.

Unsavory talk filled the air, and my mother just sat in the middle of it all, silent.

Why was my mother able to fulfill her role so seriously, so perfectly?

Was it because she didn't have anything else to cling to?

Or was it because she didn't want to become polluted like all the other adults around her?

Maybe carrying out this noble, precious role assigned to her by the gods was the only way my lonely mother could feel at peace.

*"How nostalgic."*

My mother muttered.

*"Until I inherited the power of the Supreme God, I did not say a single word. I was ridiculed and called a fool, but I remained silent, listening to what everybody else was saying. Then, the same day I inherited the power of the Supreme God, I began to cleanse the Tsukuyomi Shrine. By that time, the shrine had already been dirtied by a long history of depravity."*

She sounded lonely.

*"Certainly, it was a favorable time for us at the shrine. We had shouldered the power of the Supreme God for a long time, had become used to such power, and began to believe that we were special. Of course, even everything I did was nothing but a temporary patch. Was everything we had built up until now useless? Were we meddling where we should not have been...?"*

*"Seriously, stop regretting stuff. We're here going to the past so we can get rid of all the regret, right?"*

Tsurugi seemed a bit exasperated.

*"No, what you've done hasn't been useless. Honestly, I'm grateful and I feel awful for it. Making you hold onto this power for so long. I should've destroyed the Tsukuyomi Shrine a long time ago and taken the power of the Supreme God back. But I took advantage of you guys and procrastinated..."*

It was rare to hear Tsurugi's voice sounding so faint.

*"Well, looks like our little detour ends here. We're gonna make a huge leap now, so hold on tight! This might be a bit hard on you humans."*

With that, our journey to the past reached its final station.

@@@@@

I saw a dazzlingly bright world before me.

Everything was filled with brilliant light.

Were we above the clouds? In any case, I could see some fluffy things floating in the background, and through the cracks of those things, a huge blue sea below. There were also a number of sacred mountains in the distance.

It wasn't even really clear how we were standing up above the clouds, but I straightened my posture and noticed a number of huge presences around me.

I instinctively understood what these presences were.

They were the forces of nature themselves, gods with immense levels of divinity.

It felt like Mount Fuji was bearing down on top of me. I cowered at the overwhelming amount of power I felt around me.

And then, I noticed.

The sun, which had always been above me, was slowly descending.

That sun was soon level with me, still shining brilliantly.

And this *mysterious, exceedingly beautiful existence* was holding three sacred objects.

A sword, a mirror, and a magatama jewel.<sup>5</sup>

The three divine instruments.<sup>6</sup>

I belatedly understood just where we were.

This was precisely the scene when Ninigi-no-Mikoto descended from the heavens.

---

<sup>5</sup> A magatama is a comma-shaped jewel. It's one half of the standard yin-yang symbol.

<sup>6</sup> In Japanese mythology, these are the three things Amaterasu bestowed upon Ninigi-no-Mikoto when he descended to Earth.

The Supreme God came down and entrusted everything to her grandson, who had become human.

The other gods also descended together from Heaven to Earth, standing guard and becoming the first of all things.

They would rule, maintain, and tune the earth from now on.

"So, what do you want?"

The divine existence in front of me spoke in a teasing voice.

"This is where I just abandoned the power of the Supreme God because I was way too tired... this is where everything began, and *we can do things over from here* if you want."

I couldn't see her actual form through the blinding light, but for some reason I knew that she was smiling.

"I've rested enough. I've depended on you guys for way too long... for longer than was needed. And, you're all just exhausted now. This is something that should never have happened. The sun herself said she had enough and stopped spinning. I really did something unforgivable."

The Supreme God Amaterasu was directly in front of me, looking at me.

"In the end, I can't tell you if all you've done through your history was right or not. You've experienced much pain, death, and this land has become chaotic like many entangled strands of hemp all because I didn't want to try. That is my own regret."

The Sun Goddess held out the three divine instruments towards me.

"Answer me please. Was I wrong? I've been thinking about this for so long but I still don't know... was I wrong to pass over such a heavy piece of baggage to you guys here? Maybe I should've tried just a bit harder?"

"Nah."

I shook my head.

"Don't feel remorse over our history, Goddess."

I'm sure my mother, whose heart was nestled close to mine right now, agreed with me.

"You tried hard for so long. You then took a short break, but now you're back again. If you're tired, then pass the baton. That's the best, most efficient method if you ask me... so you weren't wrong."

I took the sword, the mirror, and the jewels, and mustered up all my strength in my words.

"We'll... try hard for you until the sun rises."

I smiled.

"Even if the moonlight may be a bit weak."

"I see."

The Sun Goddess smiled, and let out a huge, catlike yawn.

"Well then... take care of it for me."

And so, the days of legend ended, and the days of history began.

And the path we would walk was now completely empty of regret.

This was our time to work. This short, fleeting time, until the rising of the sun.

@@@@@

Our regrets had vanished.

The burdens on my mind, on my mother's mind, on Tsurugi's mind... they were lightened, if only by a little.

History was not altered, and we found ourselves back at the *problem point* when an anomaly first appeared in the timeline.

"Well then!"

Tamamo-no-Mae, the One who Dances on the Scales, spoke with triumph in her voice from within the Killing Stone Golem.

"Have a happy death, Tsukuyomi Juju! And so we draw the final curtain on the Tsukuyomi Shrine, and bring glory to Arahabaki!"

"Unfortunately for you..."

Suddenly, I felt a wave of power swirling in my mother's body, even as it was on the verge of being crushed by the Golem.

"I have been temporarily entrusted with the power of the Supreme God by my daughter. I now have a duty to work hard for a number of years to come. I made a promise. I will not allow you to kill me."

Spiritual energy swelled from my mother's body as she struggled.

"Wha-... I knew something seemed strange!"

Tamamo-no-Mae looked shaken.

"Why is it that there is another heart... another *divine spirit* present in Tsukuyomi Sasami's body? I should have been able to deal swiftly with an inexperienced girl like Sasami! Why did I have to awaken when there was such a powerful divine spirit mixed in?!"

"Sorry, but you were nothing but the *fodder* for mending a mother-daughter relationship."

Suddenly, I heard a voice, and the Killing Stone Golem's arm flew off.

A charm had been thrown at it.

"You might've waited ten years for the right opportunity but too bad. You have this strange ability to go to the past, and you happened to be inside Sasami, so I took advantage of that and used your powers."

The one who was attacking was... Micchan, who had been blown away by the golem just moments before.

Wait, could she actually use charms like this?

Ah, Tsurugi was probably inside her body right now.

"There doesn't seem to be much spiritual energy in this body... but there's still some. If I concentrate all this energy, I can do this much. Well, but I think I'm at my limit here... the rest is up to you."

"Gladly!"

The Killing Stone Golem's arm had been destroyed.

My mother slipped out from the gaps in the Golem's fingers, and then she swiftly teleported upwards while unsheathing her sword.

The golem's head flew into the air, and the young me was liberated from the monster.

I saw my chance and quickly leapt into the young me's body.

My mother caught me in midair, and we descended to the ground together.

We then turned around to face this terrifying monster who could change the past.

Tamamo-no-Mae was trembling.

"Y-You used me...? I am the pale-faced, golden-furred, nine-tailed fox. I am the one who has toppled nations and dynasties through intrigue and guile, and *you* used *me*...?"

Poison gas erupted from the golem's body, and the headless monster charged at us.

"You will die... die a painful death! I will turn you into minced meat and serve you as an appetizer!"

"... My apologies, but I will not allow that to happen."

My mother didn't move, but just readied her sword, our hands still joined.

"Finally, I can fulfill the *true* role given to us by the Supreme God in times of legend... and I finally understand that role. I finally remembered the meaning of that role. Nine-tailed fox, you will not destroy this land. I will protect it until the rising of the sun... I, who was bestowed with the three divine instruments, will take pride in that!"

The battle ended in the blink of an eye.

My mother slashed her sword grandly, and the Killing Stone Golem was rent in two.

At the same time, the spiritual energy encased in her long sword exploded, sending Tamamo-no-Mae flying.

It was like watching fireworks.

My mother's hand that was joined to mine felt hot.

Maybe because we had defeated Tamamo-no-Mae, the space around us distorted and I saw static run through the air.

And so, this fleeting dream came to an end.

"Okay then."

Micchan, or rather the lazy god inside of Micchan, let out a huge yawn.

"I'll count on ya for a bit longer then."

My mother and I both nodded at her words.

The sun passes the baton to the moon, and the moon passes the baton back to the sun. And thus the world continued to spin.

Towards tomorrow, one step at a time.

**Chapter 11: Micchan's (alias) Business Logbook (Part 2)**

**Month of \_\_, Day ##. Sunny and clear.**

**-**

**Juju-sama came back!**

**I heard the story about her coming back from the Underworld, but then all news about her stopped coming. I thought I would never be able to behold her presence again.**

**As expected from the strongest Tsukuyomi Priestess in history!**

**Juju-sama broke all the world's rules, overcame all obstacles, and now she's back!**

**As a priestess serving the gods, I can't really approve of what Juju-sama did.**

**Since ancient times, escaping from the Underworld has been considered the most sacred of taboos in this country.**

It was a reckless act that even Izanagi and Izanami couldn't succeed in and was something to be avoided.

But when I see the household head crying alligator tears and hugging Juju-sama with his cheek rubbing against hers, going "Juju-chan Juju-chan~~," and when I see Juju-sama looking intensely displeased but still a bit happy for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to care about the rules anymore. To be human is to twist all logic, to overturn all the myths and legends! My my, an insignificant person like me ended up thinking some quite outrageous things.

-

Month of %, Day %. Sunny, then cloudy.

-

Juju-sama found a certain collar.

I thought I had properly disposed of that thing too...!

She also saw how the name "Tsukuyomi Ruza" was engraved on the collar, and after intense questioning managed to get the truth out of our household head. She also easily prevented me from escaping through the window with a charm...

Juju-sama soon understood everything about the household head's disgraceful behavior after the shrine was destroyed and how we fell into a "festering, indulgent" lifestyle (as she put it).

It's not like we did anything worth feeling guilty over, and since Juju-sama was technically dead the household head was free to fall in love with anyone, marry anyone, do SM stuff with anyone he wanted, but "that is not the point," she claimed as she lectured us.

Even though I didn't do anything wrong...

But Juju-sama is so cute when she's jealous~~. I want to just gobble her up~~. And I accidentally said all that out loud while Juju-sama was washing my back at a public bath nearby, which led her to punch me without any emotion on her face and split my cheek open. The bathwater was dyed red. We were banned from the bathhouse.

-

Month of !!, Day ++. First storm of spring.

-

I asked Juju-sama what she planned to do from now on.

The household head had done a complete 180 from his depression and was now full of energy. He started getting worked up about taking back the power of the Supreme God and returning Sasami-sama to the shrine.

However, it seemed the situation wasn't that simple. Juju-sama also hadn't come back from the Underworld unscathed. Reincarnation? I didn't really understand it all, but it seemed we would just stand by and quietly observe for a while.

Juju-sama had broken the rules, and it probably caused her great pain just to stay in this world.

However, I wonder what happened... Juju-sama didn't seem to be in a hurry at all and just said that she wanted to make sure of something first.

"I said I was working for the sake of this world, for the sake of the humans living in this world... but did I really understand this world or its people as much as I claimed?"

Those were Juju-sama's words.

"I will keep watch for a little while. Keep watch over everything. Keep watch over the world I never properly looked at while I was alive. Over this inexplicable world which that child has fallen in love with, a world which continues to tirelessly persist in the end times of this myth, a world I have sworn to protect."

After that, Juju-sama seemed a bit uncertain.

"... Micchan, will you come with me?"

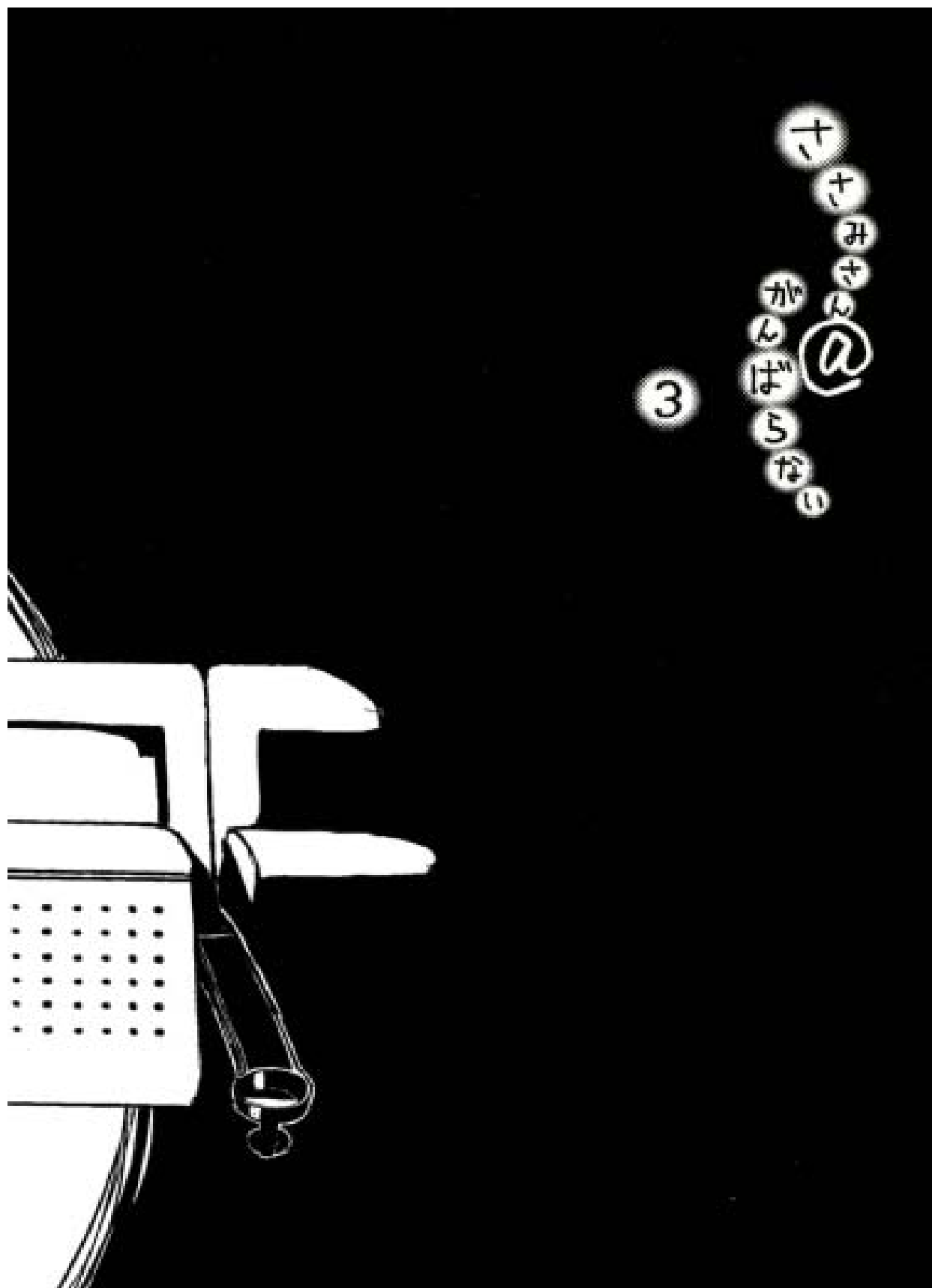
She was so cute that I couldn't help but shoot blood from my nos... couldn't help but to just give her an honest smile. "Of course, Juju-sama!" I answered.

-

The Tsukuyomi Shrine is back in business!

Let's all work hard for the sake of the world, for the sake of the humans in that world~~.





## Chapter 12: And Then, a Witch...

It was a chilly day, right before the end of our spring break.

I had successfully "given birth" and had made a full recovery. I could finally go outside again.

Of course, it's not like I was pregnant in the normal sense, so instead of "giving birth" you probably should say I successfully performed a "divine birth."

I had managed to drop all that extra fat I had picked up, and like the legend of Chikarataro,<sup>1</sup> I molded that fat into a human shape.

Within that fat rested the power of the Supreme God, which I had transferred to it, and my mother's will which would control that power.

My consciousness had been pretty hazy while this whole divine birth was going on, but...

I think I had a pretty strange dream.

No, it was more a trip to the past that was borrowing the form of a dream.

---

<sup>1</sup> A folk tale in which a baby is born from the dirt that an old couple has on their skin.

I remembered our confrontation with Tamamo-no-Mae, the fiendish god who was trying to alter the past, my interactions with my mother and with Tsurugi, and our parent-teacher conference.

After getting through all that and waking up, I found that my body was back to normal.

I had no idea where my mother was.

She was probably somewhere fulfilling our promise - keeping the power of the Supreme God safe until I was ready to take it back.

"It certainly seems like you've been through quite a bit."

We were in a dim movie theater.

Kagami was sitting right next to me, whispering in my ear.

Today, I was on a play date together with Kagami.

She was in a pretty cute outfit and had braided her hair. She gave me a slight bow.

"Congratulations on your new baby."

"Stop it. That's not funny."

I would probably never have kids.

Sure, I had made up with my mom, and I no longer felt a strong urge to get away from her and end the Tsukuyomi bloodline... but if we were just going to go through this cycle over and over, then I didn't need kids.

We would end that cycle with my and my mother's generation.

"Is there still anything unusual happening with your body?"

Kagami gave me a worried look, and I gave her a bitter chuckle back.

"Nah. My weight was worrying me more than anything, and that's more or less gone back to normal."

"More or less, you say? Does that mean you are still slightly chubbier than you were? Ah, certainly... looking closely, it does seem that your cheeks are a bit... *squish squish*."

"Stop! Don't touch me! This is... uhh... this has nothing to do with mom. I locked myself in and ate and slept too much, and so this is the mark of guilt for letting the demon known as inevitability into my body!"

"Ahh, that's right, Sasami-san... you stayed in your room for the entire spring break, didn't you? Of course you would grow fat from that. That must be why you feel desperate enough to come out and roam around like this, trying to burn off that excess fat."

"Yeah. I guess the lesson learned this time is: if you lock yourself in your room and just sleep and eat all day, you'll get fat! Or something like that."

"Granted, that lesson is **quite an obvious one**. Ahh, that's right, Sasami-san lost the power of the Supreme God, correct? And she cannot use her spiritual abilities to lose weight, correct? There also still seems to be a bit of snow left in town, so it could be that there remain lingering aftereffects of this little adventure of ours..."

Kagami let out a gloomy sigh.

"Neesan also seems to have completely restored herself from the Underworld and is back to normal. However, perhaps she is slightly unstable because there are times when she still acts rather buggy. Just the other day, she slipped into my futon. 'Ehehe, Kagami-chan, can I sleep with you. *Huff, huff*, I swear I won't do anything pervy,' she said to me."

I watched Kagami be a worry wart and suddenly realized something.

"..... By the way, should we really be talking like this? Shouldn't we be focusing on the movie?"

"I-I cannot. I am adamantly trying not to look."

Kagami shook her head vigorously and rejected my suggestion.

Well, I kind of understood where she was coming from.

After all, that huge screen was throwing so many images of blood splatter at us that I could've sworn we were watching a horror flick.

For a while now, Kagami had been grabbing firmly onto the hem of my shirt, looking down, and trying desperately not to look at the screen.

"Ehh..."

I put my hand on top of the doll-like Kagami's head and began to stroke her sleek black hair.

"I guess we should've realized when we noticed we were the only ones watching this movie. We really should've just picked the safe action movie we were originally planning on, but Kagami got lured away by that cute animal poster she saw and really wanted to see this movie instead."

Now I realize that changing your plans so suddenly was just inviting trouble. You really had to be careful on dates...

"To think... what we thought was a heartwarming story about cute animals being all fluffy and happy and kyakyaa~~ and ufufu~~ would turn out to be a movie on how to **make delicious food out of those cute animals**... seriously, an 'animal movie' and a 'documentary about animals' are polar opposites of each other, aren't they? Ahh, look what they're doing to that baby spotted seal..."

"Nooooo, Mr. Seal... Mr. Seal?! No! And with soy sauce?!"

Kagami buried her face into my chest, sobbing a flood of tears.

"I do not think I can eat meat any longer... humans are cruel, cruel creatures..."

Kagami sure was cute.

@@@@@

It was evening on the same day.

Kagami had exhausted all her energy and patience at the movie theater, so we just did some window shopping while taking a few breaks in between, playing out the rest of our date in a pretty normal way.

If we stayed out too late, certain overprotective family members would start worrying about us, so we walked back together as far as we could while making small talk and then said goodbye for the night.

Neither of us had eaten dinner yet.

We were high school students, so as long as we didn't stay out overnight we could've been out a bit longer... but it was our first date like this, and both of us had annoying guardians at home.

Kagami and I lived in the same neighborhood, so when we went our separate ways, I was already pretty much at my house.

Even then, I still sent Kagami a text while walking home.

**Today was really fun. Let's hang out again and go somewhere before spring break ends. We could go eat yakiniku or barbeque or something~~.**

I waited a little bit, and I got a response.

**Please cease all talk about meat.**

Good, a reply.

I tried continuing this exchange without being too annoying.

Maybe we can go to the zoo next then?

In that case, I would like to bring Tama as well. Someone sent some zoo pamphlets to our house, and Tama has been annoying me to take her ever since.

Sure~~. Tama is a good kid, and the more the merrier.

Ah, I have arrived. Thank you very much for today.

It was fun. I'll text you again, Kagami! I love you (>w<).

Shut up (= \_ =).<sup>2</sup>

It was the accumulation of small things like this that would strengthen our connection with each other.

Okay, I admit it might've been a bit strange to be thinking like that about a friend, but the book I was referencing was a book that was supposed to bring you closer to someone you loved.

---

<sup>2</sup> (Typesetter Note) Nano pls.

Why was it that there were mountains of books on how to flirt with a lover, but none on how to deepen a friendship with the first friend you made in high school?

"Welcome back, Sasami-san!"

My brother was shoveling snow in front of our house.

He was in a raincoat, ready to get a bit dirty, and busily working his shovel.

It seemed that there were some alterations still left over evident from the snow that was still piling up on the ground in my town.

I smiled at my brother as his breath misted white in front of his face.

"I'm back, oniichan."

"Your oniichan is also relieved that you've been going outside again~. At this rate, you'll probably be able to go to school normally too when spring break ends."

"Ugh, that's what I've been saying. When I locked myself in my room, I was just taking a bit of a break."

Well, it's not like I didn't understand where his worry was coming from.

I looked at my brother in slight disbelief. But he remained just as cheerful.

"How was your date with Kagami-san? Was it fun?"

"Yup~~."

"I see..."

My brother still seemed very calm on the surface, but I could hear him grinding his teeth.

Scary...

"**Dammit.** Ah, your oniichan isn't jealous at all. Sasami-san's happiness is my happiness, after all. I'm definitely not jealous of Kagami-san for taking Sasami-san all to herself or anything and I definitely haven't been out here since the morning shoveling snow to try and vent all that jealousy out."

"Uwah, now that I look at it, all that snow is gone already! There was so much of it this morning too! Are you seriously *that* jealous?!"

I had thought that with my brother the way he is, he would definitely come and butt in on my date. I guess he had been able to relieve his stress by shoveling snow, and that's why he didn't show up.

Even my brother had learned a bit of tact, hadn't he...?

"I'll be done soon so please wait a bit before dinner is ready."

"I'll help too, oniichan."

I felt a little bad for making my brother do all this work while I went out and played with friends, so I took the shovel from my brother and stuck it into a nearby snow pile.

Also, this was the first time I'd ever shoveled snow, so I was a bit curious.

"Hyah... ah."

I put strength into the shovel and moved some of the surprisingly heavy snow out of the way.

And that exhausted all my strength.

"Agh, ow ow ow ow, my back hurts. I'm done. Oniichan, you can handle the rest."

"What?! That fast?! W-Wait, Sasami-san! I'll go bring another shovel, and then we can shovel snow together! And then all the old ladies in the neighborhood can be like 'Ohh, look at those siblings. They get along so well,' and I can respond 'Siblings?! We're husband and wife!'" And then-

"Don't come hugging me from behind while spouting out all that nonsense!"

My brother must've been really lonely from having been left at home alone. He came up from behind and wrapped his arms firmly around me.

We've been through a lot, but it seems things had finally kind of returned to normal. I sighed a sigh of relief.

@@@@@

"Good afternoon."

Suddenly, someone's voice echoed around me.

It was a sweet, melting voice, reminding me of a piece of diligently crafted sugar candy.

I stopped trying to pry my brother off of me and looked to the side, a bit surprised.

*She* was standing there.

A girl who looked to be around the same age as me.

She was wearing a Konohana Sakuya Academy uniform.

Her long hair was pale but still managed to have a luscious-look, and it was bound in two tails which hung down on both sides of her head.

She was pretty small, but her lips were plump and her breasts definitely asserted a sense of presence.

This is probably a pretty weird way of putting it, but she was like a pretty, young girl who had jumped out from two dimensions right into our three-dimensional world.

"Umm..."

I looked around to make sure that there was nobody else she could've been talking to. I figured she was a neighbor or something, so I gave her a small bow.

"G-Good afternoon."

I was planning on getting back to shoveling snow after those obligatory pleasantries, but she began to walk towards me. "Ku ku ku," she chuckled, sounding almost like a witch.

Unlike me, who kept on looking down at the ground, she looked me straight in the face.

"Tsukuyomi Sasami-san?"

And called me by name.

Startled, I lifted my head and took a long, hard look at her.

"Umm... have we made each other's acquaintance before?"

She looked like she was the same age as I was, but for some reason I spoke formally.

Well, we also were just outside my house, and there was a nameplate there with "Tsukuyomi Kamiomi Sasami" written on it, so it's possible she could've just guessed my name right.

But... this girl... she was acting really friendly.

That's why I suspected that maybe we had met somewhere before.

"You don't have to be so guarded."

She leaned her face close into mine, like a snake preparing to swallow its prey.

"Pretty sure this is the first time we've met. Look, I'm also a student at Konohana Sakuya Academy."

She lifted the hem of her skirt and gave me a little bow.

"Like you, I'll be a second year from April. Ahh, you're pretty famous though, so of course I'd know your name. I mean, you never came to school before but come February suddenly you start showing up. On top of that, you're the little sister of one of the teachers, so of course everybody would be curious. Everyone's really really interested in you."

"Uhh..."

Really? Was that so?

"We were in different classes until now, so I didn't really have the opportunity to speak to you."

The girl gave me a pure smile.

"I'd be happy if you remember me from here on out. I'm the president of the student council at Konohana Sakuya Academy, so if you need anything just let me know."

Our student council president?

Was our student council president really this girl?

Also, she said she had been a first year... how could you become the student council president as a first year?

"Let's be friends."

But I saw her holding a hand out to me and tempting me with sweet words like "friends."

So, I didn't think about it too hard and took her hand with my own.

After the events of the other day, the gods in our school weren't raising a fuss anymore, so they wouldn't cast alterations to make other students be friendly with me.

Kagami had told me that if I could make a friend now, it would be out of my own strengths and efforts.

If she was right, then I could take simple and honest joy at this girl's proposal.

".....?"

I blushed a bit at my own thoughts. The girl then suddenly frowned with a suspicious look on her face.

I cocked my head to the side in confusion. What was wrong? I mean, we're here still shaking hands, and-

-

"My my, aren't you happy, Sasami-san? You've made another friend."

-

My brother, who was still hugging me from a moment before, suddenly spoke up.

For some reason, his tone was serious, almost biting.

"Let me make a request as well... please get along with Sasami-san. She does not have many friends, and so I always worry about her."

At that point, the girl seemed to finally notice my brother's existence, and she widened her eyes in surprise. However, my brother just continued without pause.

"However, if you plan to use Sasami-san for your own purposes, if you're planning something and hurt her... even if you're her friend, I'll never forgive you."

"Oniichan, your face..."

I realized then.

My brother was not hiding his face.

Of course, he was hugging me from behind and the sun was hitting his face at a weird angle, so I couldn't see him very well.

But his vivid eyes left an impression in my mind.

"Hmph."

The girl took a few steps back, her body now tense and guarded.

She put her hands on her hips, scrutinizing my brother.

At which point, she asked a rather strange question.

"Who are you with? The Emishi? The Tsuchigumo, maybe? Or perhaps the Arahabaki?"

"I do believe you have the wrong idea."

My brother gave a nonchalant response to which the girl laughed again.

"Ku ku ku! I see."

She gave us an ecstatic nod and then turned the other way.

"Things are becoming more and more fascinating. You two are certainly interesting."

Her angel-like, white tufts of hair seemed to flap like wings in the air.

"Well then... I will be on my way. It would be nice if we could be in the same class together in our second year."

"Umm, what's your name?"

I just realized that I had never asked that question.

The girl looked back for just a moment and gave me a devilish smirk.

"My name is Edogawa Jou. A strange name, isn't it? Let's get along from now on... Sasami-san."

@@@@@

The following is something I heard later and second-hand.

-

The girl who had given her name as Edogawa Jou left me and gracefully walked up the path to Konohana Sakuya Academy.

Soon, in the midst of this wintry desolation, she came upon a girl sitting on the guardrail that separated the sidewalk from the road. Bare trees surrounded both of them as the girl dangled and swung her legs to and fro.

She looked young enough to be an elementary schooler, but she certainly had a set of features that stood out and made her seem like a foreigner.

For some reason, she was wearing a maid outfit that looked completely out of place in a normal town like this, and she was also sprouting an even more out-of-place pair of fox ears.

One could see a number of fluffy tails coming from her skirt.

"It is quite cold out here, you know."

The girl grumbled, her voice way too bewitching to belong to someone in such a young-looking body.

"It is quite rare to see you acting directly. What brought this about? Usually you do not even give out orders, and instead leave everything to us."

"My, did you not hear? I'm quite interested now... in that girl."

Jou smiled and continued to walk.

The girl in the maid outfit also stood up, sticking to Jou like a shadow and letting out a gloomy sigh.

"However, it seems we did not accomplish our goal."

She sounded very disappointed.

"That girl... she's lost the power of the Supreme God."

The maid girl's eyes widened.

"T-That... cannot be. It did not feel that way at all. I was too terrified to get close, but I can feel her immense divinity even from here."

"It's all a mask. Even an empty shell that used to house the power of the Supreme God would contain quite a bit of divinity. If you think about that Yagami Tsurugi, the dredges left over from Amaterasu, then you should understand what I mean."

Jou held up the hand she had used to shake mine in front of her eyes and shrugged.

"It seems our aim was a bit off. I believed that through shaking hands, through physical contact, through that point of *invasion*, the divine spirit of the Eternal Rebel Arahabaki which resides within me would be able to absorb the power of the Supreme God from her."

In contrast to her tone, Jou had a full smile on her face and seemed to be enjoying herself quite a lot.

"But all is well. We seem to have picked up something unforeseen as well... I'm looking forward to what will happen now. I am looking forward to becoming a second year... no, to the entire spring."

And then, as if in response to her words...

Perhaps it was a coincidence, or perhaps... just like the other gods had done that one time when they sensed my feelings, all the sakura blossoms around us burst into full bloom, sending pink petals everywhere.

"I cannot claim to know what you are planning."

The girl in the maid outfit ran after and caught up to the beautiful Jou, through the middle of this befuddled spring.

She was like an innocent child who had been told never to stray away from her parent.

"You are our master. You give us a place to belong, a reason to exist. Even if you desire destruction, we will do nothing but obey."

"Yes. I will be counting on it."

Like a stage actor, Jou spread her arms out and made a declaration.

"All things in the world exist purely for my happiness. In other words, all things in the world exist purely to fulfill my every desire. Through the combined power of the sinister occult society Arahabaki, let us take to task all the gods of this land... all the gods of this world who recline comfortably in their seats, shouting their divinity out arrogantly as if it means something. Let us make them eat their words."

"As you wish, *milady*."

The witch and the fox walked onwards.

Walked on as they wished... arrogantly, but freely.

-

It was only a little bit later that I discovered this girl's - Edogawa Jou's - true identity.





## SPECIAL STORY: Kushinada-Hime<sup>1</sup>

### Chapter 13: Nozomi's ☆ Secret 1<sup>2</sup>

My name is Kushinada Nozomi.

I'm a third grader at Iwanaga Elementary School, and I'm also our class representative.

I'm pretty short, bad at speaking to others, and don't really stand out in any way. In other words, I'm a completely normal, plain girl.

But, I did have just one huge, huge secret.

☆☆☆

Recently, there's been one thing that's been worrying me.

Well... it wasn't really *worrying* me, but it was just a bit strange.

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<sup>1</sup> Kushinada-Hime is the wife of Susanoo, who was saved from the Yamata-no-Orochi according to Japanese mythology.

<sup>2</sup> Nozomi not only is the name of a character in this arc, but it also means "wish" or "desire." You could interpret this title to mean "Secret Wish."

One of my classmates was really, really *big*.

(Hmm...)

It was Wednesday, and our afternoon classes had been cancelled because people said they were too inefficient. So, school ended before noon.

I was in the middle of getting taught basic math when I turned my eyes forward.

There was a single girl sitting in front of me.

Well, it was a bit strange to call her a *girl* though. Her legs and arms were long and she looked like those actors I saw a lot on the TV or maybe a character who might show up in a manga. She was really pretty.

She was supposed to be my age, but she was somewhere between 1.5 to 2 times taller than me. Her hair was beautifully blonde like the sun, which made it unlike anything a Japanese person should have. She was also filled out in ways that were clearly different from everyone else in the class, whose bodies had not even developed secondary sex characteristics yet.

She stuck out like a sore thumb in this super average school.

"Howawawa..."

This girl, my inexplicable classmate named Yagami Tama, suddenly let out yawn before mumbling something weird to herself. "Frakshons? I don't get it... which chef invented these frakshons?"

She talked to herself a lot.

We were in the second half of February, which meant there was still enough chill in the outside air. It also meant that our school year was almost over<sup>3</sup>, and everyone was feeling a bit sluggish. In the middle of such a school day, I just stared at that girl.

Yeah, no matter how many times I looked at her... this was too strange.

Why was there an *adult* like Tama-chan mixed in with our class?

(Yeah, she has to be an adult. This is way too strange.)

I had already learned my fractions over and over again at cram school, so I was pretty bored. So I just sat there with one elbow on my desk, observing Tama-chan.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Japanese school year starts in April.

(I asked the teacher too why we're in class with an adult, but she just looked at me like I said something crazy. Maybe all the other people in this class are idiots too, but nobody else seemed to think it was strange either... this is so strange. Adults shouldn't be in elementary school.)

*Because you're both the same age*, they had told me. I had no idea how they justified that reasoning, but apparently that was why I had to sit here together with her, taking a math class that I already completely understood.

In high school you could jump grades, but for elementary schoolers, learning things ahead of everyone else was completely pointless.

Even if I tried really hard at cram school and forced myself ahead of everyone else, my parents would just tell me "Nozomi-chan, you're such a good child. You're smarter than all the other children at your school, aren't you?" What a pointless, unproductive way to praise your child.

(Tama-chan is worse at studying than a normal adult, so maybe that's why she's here in elementary school...? But then they could just say that instead of telling me she's the same age as me. But Tama-chan and everyone else keep on saying that... even though she's an adult. She really looks like an adult.)

After school, I've seen Tama-chan get stopped by pedestrians and the police, who give her these scary looks and ask her why she wasn't embarrassed to be carrying an elementary schooler's bookbag.<sup>4</sup> But at school, nobody said a word.

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<sup>4</sup> Elementary schoolers in Japan generally carry these things called "randoseru," which are very red and indicative that the bearer is in elementary school.

It was unnatural.

I'm sure there was some big secret involved in all of this.

"Hwa?"

Tama-chan seemed to suddenly realize she was being watched, and turned around to look at me.

"Need something, Nozomi-chan?"

She usually acted like a huge idiot, but occasionally she could be quite perceptive.

"Not really..."

I felt a bit of panic, but I decided that this might be a good opportunity to try and verify some of the stuff I've been thinking about.

"Tama-chan is too big, and I can't see the blackboard."

That was true too.

When Tama-chan was in front of me, she seriously blocked my view of everything.

I knew that all too well... but the seating arrangements were decided by Japanese alphabetical order on our first names, and "Tama" was right before "Nozomi."  
Ugh, me and my great luck.

"Really? Mmm... then how about this~?"

Tama-chan suddenly reached out for me, and to my horror, easily lifted me up.

She put me on her own lap.

"Now Nozomi-chan can see the blackboard!"

Tama-chan gave me an innocent smile, and today once again I found myself unable to say anything back.

☆☆☆

It was after school on the same day.

After I had eaten lunch, classes were already over, so I found myself cleaning the classroom with everyone else.

After school, we could choose to join a club, take an elective, or just go home.

It was all something about how independence was important and blah blah blah.

Honestly though, when our afternoons were completely free like this, I found myself with way too much time to know what to do with.

There was a meeting on Wednesdays for all the class reps though, so I was a bit bummed out by that.

Honestly, I'm only our class rep because I lost a game of rock paper scissors and it was forced on me. My mom told me it was an important title and a good thing and seemed pretty proud about it, but honestly for me it was mostly just a bother.

Of course, this was an elementary school class rep meeting, so it's not like we had any real power.

Everyone just got together and we just repeated the same old, clichéd discussions, pretending to be adults.

Like idiots.

(Actually...)

All the desks in the classroom were piled in the front of the room as we swept the floors with brooms. But at that point something came to mind.

(Tama-chan always goes straight home after school, doesn't she?)

During your free time, you could try clubs and electives, or even extracurriculars or work experience, but there were also plenty of fun-loving people around me who chose to do none of those things.

But Tama-chan was really popular (honestly, no matter how much of an "important" class rep I was, compared to Tama-chan, nobody really respected me at all), tall, and super athletic. She got invites all the time from the sports clubs.

But she rejected all of them, and she also hated studying so she didn't really take any other classes so she just ended up going home.

According to my childhood friend Satou, she often played with the boys in the park, or ended up going to the high school to visit her sister.

"Hey, Tama-chan."

Tama-chan had dunked a cleaning cloth into a bucket and was raising a fuss about something. "Hmph! Cold! Like Antarctica! Taro and Jiro were so sad!"<sup>5</sup>.

I walked up to her and asked, "Tama, what do you always do after school?"

"Howawa.....?"

Tama-chan opened her mouth wide like an idiot and answered me without thinking.

"Umm umm, well, Tama has to grow up and be an adult. So there're these irregularities, right? And these evil gods, right? Tama goes around gobbling them up! There're lots and lots of irregularities in this town, so Tama has a lot to eat, and Tsurugi-nee says that's good for Tama's growth too!"

... Was she speaking Japanese?

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"What does Nozomi-chan do after school?"

---

<sup>5</sup> A reference to Taro and Jiro from Antarctica Story, a movie about an expedition to save some sled dogs from Antarctica.

Tama-chan wrung her washcloth with incredible strength and cocked her head to the side.

"Tama always invites Nozomi-chan to play but she never says yes. That makes Tama really sad. Umm, lately Tama has been in the park playing soccer, but there aren't any other girls. Nozomi-chan, do you want to come?"

"Soccer?"

I mean, I don't hate watching it on TV, but playing it myself was a bit...

"I can't. I'm pretty bad at sports."

"But you're so good at studying!"

"Studying and athleticism have nothing to do with each other. Also, I have cram school."

"Cram... school?"

Tama-chan stared at me blankly.

Well, I guess lately parents have stopped going on and on about cram schools and studying and tests and whatnot, so there were even some people nowadays who haven't even heard of cram school.

What a blessed life that was.

"Umm, excuse me?"

A voice came from the hallway while we continued our idle talk.

"Umm, is Yagami Tama-chan here?"

"Howawawa...?"

Tama-chan promptly stood up (and when she stood up she sure was huge...) and turned toward the door.

"Hmm? It's meat. What are you doing here?"

Meat?

My curiosity was piqued by that interesting choice of words, so I turned to look at the door as well.

Tama-chan's huge body was blocking my view so I couldn't see too clearly, but there was a girl standing there who looked to be about high school age, and she handed Tama-chan a small bundle.

"Tama, you forgot your bentou, didn't you? I found this left in the kitchen so I didn't know what to do, but then I thought I'd send it to you... I-it's not like I thought it'd be sad to see you go with an empty stomach or anything. I just felt like it, okay?!"

Sounded like we were dealing with a tsundere here, and atop that tsundere's head...

It almost looked like there was a pair of thin, white bunny ears moving to and fro...?

I only saw it for a second, and it's not like I was trying really hard to pay attention, so maybe it was just my imagination...

☆ ☆ ☆

**To Nozomi**

It was after that.

We had finished cleaning the classroom, and I had also just finished with my tedious, meandering class rep meeting when, with perfect timing, I received a mail on my phone.

It was from my mom.

**It seems like the cram school teacher is sick so there won't be any lessons today. Could you come home directly? If you could help with walking Alice and the laundry that would be great.**

Alice was the name of our dog.

She always disappeared somewhere, so we named her Alice.

But anyway... it looked like I didn't have cram school today. Hmm...

I had gotten a bit of unexpected free time, but honestly it's not like I knew what to do with it.

But I didn't want to just go back home and do the bidding of my mother who, despite acting so high and mighty all the time, still managed to shove all the chores onto my shoulders. So, I decided...

**I actually just got some things to do from the committee meeting, so I'll go do that.**

"And I'll tell her that I have to help weed the school grounds... okay, that should do it. Now she won't complain if I'm late."

I finished writing my response and left school, wearing my red backpack.

Well, it looks like I made a lot of free time for myself... what should I do?

(Maybe I should drop by an Internet café? I do want that limited item for Yamata no Orochi SNS that you can only get at net cafés, but... Tama-chan also invited me to soccer, so maybe I can do that too? But there are boys there, and boys are so vulgar...)

I thought as I walked along the streets of Ame-no-Nuboko City alone.

While walking, I suddenly noticed something.

In the middle of the endlessly stretching series of residential fences and walls running along the street...

There was a gaping wide entrance to an unnatural looking back street.

I had always passed by this place without paying that gloomy, dark space any mind, but today I strained my eyes to give it a good look.

(Ah, here it comes again...)

I felt a shiver run up my spine.

I had just one secret that I could never tell anybody.

Initially, I thought it was a cat.

Or no, maybe I wanted to believe that it was a cat.

There was a plastic garbage bin in the back alley. I had no idea who put it there and who was using it.

I saw *something* sticking its head into that bin and rummaging around.

That *thing* had eight long, rough and bony legs, and almost looked like a gigantic spider.

Its entire form was rather hazy, and I couldn't see it very well unless I reaaaaally strained my eyes.

I'm pretty sure that you'd never find a drawing of this particular monster in any of the children's picture books, and for some reason, a bunch of heads that looked like the heads of middle-aged men stuck out of that monstrous body like grapes from a vine. The monster was mumbling to itself and wriggling around right next to the trash can.

(Uuuu...)

My legs began to tremble and I felt paralyzed, but I forced my eyes away.

(I can't see it, I can't see it, I can't see it. Nothing like that exists, it can't, it can't.)

I desperately prayed in my head while my legs moved of their own accord and carried me at a reckless pace away from that place.

I ran until I was exhausted and out of breath, and I stopped in the middle of the road, trying to steady my breathing.

My bookbag was still carrying all my textbooks, and its weight made me almost collapse.

"Hm, Nozomi?"

As I tried to frantically deal with this frigid chill running through my veins, I heard a voice calling out to me from the side.

I suddenly realized that I was right next to the park that I originally was vaguely wandering toward. It was the park Tama-chan was playing soccer at, surrounded by a bunch of boys from our class.

The kid who had called out to me from within that youthful throng was Satou.

Satou Yamato.

"What's wrong?"

This was my childhood friend who wore glasses and looked pretty self-important even though he was only slightly taller than I was. He came up to me with a look of worry in his eyes.

He really wasn't a bad guy, but Satou would never understand.

"It's nothing."

I really didn't have the strength or energy to get mixed up in a soccer game right now.

"I'm going back."

"Hm, isn't that Nozomi? Why is she here?" "Is she on her way to cram school or something?"

I didn't want to deal with everyone's stares right now, so I turned heel and started walking home.

"....."

However, I did notice that Tama-chan, who stood heads above all the other kids, was looking at me in uncharacteristic silence.

☆☆☆

That night, I had a dream.

I dreamt that the spider monster I had seen in the back alley somehow managed to unlock my bedroom window and came stealing into my room.

And then, completely out of the blue, Tama-chan appeared in the dream and beat the spider monster up.

*Sorry, Nozomi-chan... Tama is so sorry...*

Tama-chan's expression as she apologized with tears leaking from her eyes left quite an impression on me.

**Chapter 14: Nozomi's ☆ Secret 2**

Cram school was cancelled for a while. It seemed the flu was spreading really quickly.

In my life, stuff like this often happened. When I thought really hard about how it'd be nice if something happened, then that thing tended to happen. On the flip side, if I was really worried that something would happen, it tended to not happen. If I could actually control this power (?) of mine, I probably could earn a lot of money off it.

Well, this was all probably just coincidence anyway.

"Three hours please."

On the way back from school, I stopped by my usual Internet café.

Just because I didn't have to go to cram school didn't mean I wanted to go straight home to do chores or to study. I mean, I wasn't insanely, deathly against that, but I would feel a bit annoyed if I had to.

"Okay. That'll be 700 yen."

When I first came, the café employee gave me a strange look and wondered what an elementary student was doing in an Internet café, but lately he's gotten used to me and thankfully hasn't paid me much mind.

I was a good girl, so my mother gave me a pretty comfortable allowance. These kinds of small expenses wouldn't make much of a dent on my wallet.

Well, okay, I couldn't come every day or anything... but if it was once a week it was fine.

(As always, the smell of cigarette smoke in here is pretty awful.)

I frowned and stretched up, handing the café employee my membership card and the 700 yen fee.

The employee quickly handed me a clipboard with information about my allotted usage time and other things written on it, and then he asked me the same question he always did.

But honestly, I wish he would think a bit before asking an elementary schooler if she wanted to use an ashtray.

I walked through the net café, which was lightly filled with purple-tinted smoke, with my book bag waving from side to side.

I got some tea from the drink station along the way, and I walked a bit more carefully so as to not spill anything.

(So, I wonder if *that person* came...)

Usually, I would be here playing online games or surfing the Internet or reading manga (I didn't have a single volume of manga at home since my mom would throw them all out).

But today, I had other plans.

I got to my booth and set my book bag down, plopping myself deeply into the reclining chair that was just a bit too big for my body.

And then, I gazed at my cell phone.

**I've arrived.**

I sent out that mail.

And then, I followed the directions pasted in my booth to turn the computer in front of me on. I was soon shown a desktop with a lot of icons on it, and I clicked on the icon marked "Yamata-no-Orochi SNS."

Most of the big online games were installed on the computers at net cafés.

Well, I guess like the name would suggest, Yamata-no-Orochi SNS was more a social networking service, but...

I wasn't very good at socializing with other people, so I enjoyed it perfectly fine purely as a game.

I waited a short while, and then the SNS screen appeared.

(Ah, it looks like the repairs aren't fully done yet...)

A little while ago, there was a mysterious accident (?) and Yamata-no-Orochi SNS underwent a large-scale system failure. As of now, the system still wasn't completely back to normal yet.

Although the basic, minimal functions were back, so as a Yamata-no-Orochi fan (who often were called "Yamachi"), I was happy enough.

**Hello.**

On the screen was my character - a female warrior named Hime who wasn't very strong at all as I had not invested much time or money into her. My character was currently trying to tell me that I had gotten a message.

I shook nervously as I began to awkwardly type on the café's coarse keyboard.

**Sorry to keep you waiting, Sasami-san.**

This was someone in the same guild (i.e. community) as me in Yamata-no-Orochi SNS. Her character's name was Sasami-san.

Her character was way, way stronger than mine, so I nervously greeted her.

Today, I would be meeting this person in real life.

Honestly, usually it was wise to not go meeting random people you first met on the Internet...

But I found out Sasami-san was living in the same town as me, and she seemed to also understand my problem and knew how to solve it, so that kinda forced me into this situation.

**So, let me just once again make sure I understand your situation.**

Right now, Sasami-san should've been in the same café as I was. Maybe she was shy, or maybe there was some other reason, but she insisted that we talk via message like this.

**... You said that you can see ghosts?**

Sasami-san put it pretty bluntly.

I had met her (okay I guess since everything was online I couldn't be sure she was actually a girl) on the homepage of a site for self-proclaimed "spiritualists." That site had shut down, but we had continued our correspondence afterwards.

**Yes. Something like that happened yesterday too, although I could've just mistaken what I saw... but there was this big spider monster.**

**That sounds pretty rough.**

Sasami-san seemed to believe my story just like that. My mom would definitely never be so accepting.

**Things might get dangerous if you don't deal with this quickly. My expertise is pretty half-baked, so I can't offer anything major... but I can teach you a charm that will give you some temporary relief.**

☆ ☆ ☆

**Hime-chan called what she saw a "ghost," but...**

Sasami-san used my Yamata-no-Orochi SNS screen name when she talked with me.

I also didn't think it was that wise to leak your personal information all over the place, so I would also act as if I was this Hime and not Kushinada Nozomi.

**In this land, it's a fundamental rule that humans cannot come back to life, so to be precise, they aren't "ghosts," but "youkai" or "monsters." They aren't ghosts who hold some kind of grudge and so cannot ascend to a higher plane, but rather supernatural beings who think of humans as nothing more than food or insignificant pebbles. That is what Hime-chan saw.**

Sasami-san courteously explained things to me.

**In most cases, humans are weaker than these monsters, but Hime-chan seems to be rather sensitive to these things (you could say you're "spiritually sensitive"), so you end up seeing what you see. That may put you into a bit of danger.**

Her words were filled with confidence, and I really felt I could believe her.

At least, way more than my teachers or my mother, who only knew how to say things that sounded sweet on the surface.

Who in the world would take me seriously if I told them I was having problems because I could see monsters?

Nobody else could see them, so it's not like I could expect anybody to sympathize with me.

**There are also humans who have relatively high levels of spiritual power and divinity, but those people are often targeted by these monsters. They're attacked, their powers are sucked from them, and sometimes they're eaten. In the worst cases, they can be spirited away, never able to return back to this plane of existence.**

**What should I do then?**

I felt myself growing scared, so I asked that question.

But, it seemed that Sasami-san also didn't have a good answer to that question.

**In general, there's not much you can do. Humans are just weaker than the monsters. If you're attacked, there's not much you can do to defend yourself. You just have to try your best to not get close to any of these monsters and to try your best not to see them. It's like a disease that you have to deal with your entire life. Well, with the right training you might be able to gain some measure of control over the power within you, but for various reasons, I wouldn't recommend getting involved with the kinds of organizations that offer that kind of training.**

So basically, I was at a complete dead end.

**But I did make a charm for you. With this, you should be able to defend yourself to some extent. If you ever see the jewel in the middle of this thing getting black, then call me again. I'll switch it out for you. Also, please call me if anything else happens, and I'll do my best to help.**

I heard something clatter open from the booth next to mine.

Then, I saw the divider between my booth and the next slide open, and someone's palm reach in through the opening.

Net cafés often came with booths that had removable dividers in case multiple people wanted to use a booth at the same time.

And, beyond the window-like opening that had now opened up next to me, I saw a single girl sitting in the chair.

This was probably Sasami-san.

In her open palm was a ring that was set with what looked like a bead.

"I can have this?"

I saw Sasami-san nod slowly after my question.

She was unexpectedly young. She was also wearing a uniform from the nearby high school, and for some reason she was hiding her face with her schoolbag.

After I took the ring, she quickly slid the divider back into place and shut herself back into her own booth.

**Sorry. If you hang out with me too much... or maybe I should say, if the other gods start believing that I'm showing you favor, then they'll all get jealous and start attacking you and doing all other kinds of nasty things. So this level of contact is the most I can do.**

I had no idea what she was talking about, but...

"Thanks, Sasami-san."

My mood lightened, and I was able to thank her sincerely.

But before long, I heard some other voice from the next booth. "Sasami-san, I was curious why you took a detour today so I followed you, but what are you doing here?! Hiding your face like that... are you imitating me?! Ahh, it's cosplay, right?! This is a sign of your love, right?!" "Uggyahh?! Where the hell did you come from, you damn pervert?!" There was quite a fuss being raised over there, so she probably didn't hear my words of gratitude.



However, Sasami-san's valiant efforts to aid me soon amounted to nothing.

You always had to show your membership card when you wanted to use a net café, and there was a lot of personal information (phone number, address, etc.) written on that card.

The shop employee probably got a bit needlessly worried about the one elementary schooler who came to the shop so often, so he ended up calling my house.

Of course, my mom just completely blew up at me.

After all, I was supposed to be the responsible honor roll student, an upstanding member of the student council, and in general, was supposed to be using all my free time to study.

So I shouldn't be taking a detour after school to go hang out in a smoke-filled, shady net café.

My mom grabbed me by the hair and screamed at me, and then she found the ring... and took it away.

-- I'm just worried about you! I'm not doing any of this out of hate, okay?!

The words that came out of my mother's mouth sounded to me like a bad joke.

**Chapter 15: Nozomi's ☆ Secret 3**

"Nozomi-chaaan~~."

It was a few days later.

I had started my day with a sigh before walking toward school, when I heard someone shouting from behind me.

Startled, I turned around and saw Tama hurtling at me with the speed of a cannonball.

"Waah-"

I unconsciously took a quick jump a few steps to the side and evaded her, but Tama couldn't stop herself from going forwards and smacking right into a telephone pole.

A painful sounding thud rang through the air.

"A-Are you okay?"

I called out to her, getting a bit worried, but she stood right back up and gave me a peace sign.

"Yup. Tama is okay."

Did she just feel no pain? I guess it's true what they say about idiots...

While I was thinking those rude thoughts, Tama gripped me by the hand.

"Hey hey Nozomi-chan, let's go to school together."

She sounded strangely earnest when she offered that, so I cocked my head to the side.

"It's fine, but..."

The path we took to school was the same, so we'd already gone to school together a few times.

"Why?"

It wasn't like I was friends with Tama-chan or anything.

If I said that to her though, she'd probably start crying, so I kept that line inside my head.

"Well, Nozomi-chan... it was Tama's fault... also, nobody else at school notices that Tama is strange. So Nozomi-chan is the only one at school Tama can be real friends with, like Mamarin and Kagami-nee... okay?"

As usual, I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Also, if Tama is here, then Tama can protect Nozomi-chan."

She was giving off a bright smile, and I honestly had no idea why.

"So you better not come any closer! If you bully Nozomi-chan, Tama will take care of you!"

Tama-chan screamed at her surroundings for some reason. I couldn't understand this either, but I could tell that she wasn't doing it out of any ill will.

☆ ☆ ☆

My peaceful, quiet days continued for a few days after that.

**Your father is coming back.**

Cram school had started again, and on the way back home one day, I received that depressing message.

**He'll be staying for a week starting tonight. So make sure you're a good girl.**

Right, right.

If I wasn't a good girl, mom would be embarrassed.

She wanted to go and show that dirty creature I called "dad" that she had raised me right, and then she was going to cling all over him and fish for compliments.

(I really don't want to go back...)

Sometimes I wished I never had a cell phone.

There were still quite a few people in our class who weren't allowed by their parents to have a cell phone yet, but this thing honestly isn't interesting at all.

All it did was allow your parents to keep constant watch over you and to mail you whenever anything happened.

Each one of those mails ended up throwing my life for a loop.

(I don't want to see dad, and I don't want to see mom. I don't want to keep pretending to be a good girl, to keep pretending to smile when I don't feel like it... I'm just tired. It'd be better to just lie down and die. I don't want to go home...)

But if I got home late, I'd just be scolded.

As an act of protest though, I ended up taking a roundabout way home, and I eventually found myself hobbling along the road under the light of the street lamps after the sun had already set.

I soon came upon one of the many streams that ran through Ame-no-Nuboko City.

There was a gentle rivulet of water flowing a short distance from the paved road, almost as if it had been separated from civilization.

The air was thick with the smell of earth. I never really walked toward this stream, but today I found Tama-chan there.

She was plopped down onto the bare earth, looking as beautiful as a goddess underneath the moonlight.

It was unusual for this season, but there were also a bunch of frogs bouncing around her, croaking.

Tama-chan had a huge smile on her face. She looked like she was having lots of fun with a frog on her head and in her open palm.

Hey, Tama-chan.

You're not only an idiot, but a bad girl who sneaks out at night to play like this.

But... you seem like you have so much fun every day, you're liked by everyone, and... that's just a bit unfair.

How can you be this happy?

"Ah, it's Nozomi-chan."

Tama-chan seemed to have noticed me, and beckoned to me like this was the most natural thing in the world.

But I got frightened, and not wanting to become conscious of my own jealousy, I ran away.



It was nighttime of the same day.

Luckily, my dad didn't end up coming home until quite late.

He was, after all, an undisciplined man who had a hard time keeping promises.

My mom should've known that from the beginning, but of course despite that she was in a pretty bad mood now.

She was sitting in front of the dinner table with a splendid feast laid out in front of her, but she was just watching TV while grumbling about something or other. I really didn't want to get close to her, so I shut myself in my room.

I laid out all my cram school homework and began dealing with them one by one, feeling myself wearing down.

(It'd be better if dad just didn't come home.)

If I really had some kind of power that nobody else had... then it'd be nice if my wish could be granted.

My mom and dad were twenty years apart in age.

My mom was the older one, and originally she was my dad's boss at a company. After a huge love affair, she ended up getting married and quitting her job.

My dad filled the role that my mom had left open at the company and worked hard, but he was less skilled and had less experience compared to my mom, so he failed quite a lot.

He was always compared with my mom at work, and my mom also knew that he was doing a bad job. So, sometimes she ended up scolding him for it.

Their relationship grew more and more tense, and eventually, my dad stopped coming home very often.

And my mom... well, she began to get quite suspicious.

When they couldn't see each other's faces much anymore, she felt distrust start to well up within her.

Each time my dad came home, my mom would lay out all the alleged evidence that he had been cheating on her, saying that she couldn't help being worried about it. She would raise a ruckus about it, acting like a child.

Then, she would act all arrogant, telling him he would never find anybody on earth better than her. She would also force me to join in on her little act. The atmosphere was truly stifling, and my dad began to distance himself more and more from home.

(They're so ridiculous...)

My dad seemed to have finally come home. I heard voices echo up from below.

There was my mom's shrill voice, spouting out some strange, incoherent things that I honestly didn't understand.

And there was my dad's resigned mumbling in response.

I covered my ears.

Shut up, shut up...!

"Nozomi, Nozomi! You're dad's home! Come show your face downstairs!"

There was a pounding at my door.

I didn't want to hear my mom's happy voice anymore.

I didn't want to be paraded in front of my dad so I could put on the good girl act that had been engraved into me with blood and tears.

I honestly knew what was going on.

I could see things that other people couldn't because I always looked away from what was happening in reality around me.

I didn't want to see this ugly, dull reality.

When I averted my gaze from everyone around me, I instead ended up seeing things squirming about that didn't belong to this world.

It was an escape from reality.

I could see ghosts. That was my one secret, my one trait that differentiated me from everyone else. It was my only reminder of who I really was, of what I was really like.

It was the one line I could draw myself on this painting of me that was otherwise crafted to be a perfect representation of a "good girl."

I knew this wasn't a good thing.

But, if I didn't draw that line, then I would cease to be myself.

The / that I knew would vanish.

Instead, I would just become like wet clay, allowing my mom to mold me into whatever false shape she wanted.

And to me, death was a better fate than that.

-

"Nozomi-chan."

-

Suddenly, I realized something.

My window was open.

I saw the full moon floating in the sky above.

I saw the curtains waving in the breeze.

A silent chill crept into my room raising goosebumps all over my skin.

And there, right on my windowsill under the moonlight, sat Tama-chan in her inhuman beauty.

I had many questions immediately float up in my head. How had she gotten up here? What was she doing here?

"Nozomi-chan, do you want to go far away?"

When Tama-chan looked serious, she was surprisingly beautiful.

"Tama is a god, although she's not very powerful yet, but someday she will be... so if you wish for it, Tama will know. Nozomi-chan is a friend, so Tama wants to help Nozomi-chan. Is that... not good? Does Nozomi-chan not want to be Tama's friend?"

My strange classmate mumbled out those words, almost sounding like she was talking to herself.

"Let's go in a big adventure. Tama will take you to a place so far away that none of the adults can go there. Tama will grant Nozomi-chan's wish."

**Chapter 16: Nozomi's ☆ Secret 4**

When I first entered elementary school, I was a foolish child who went around saying that I could see ghosts.

Of course, everyone else thought I was pretty strange... even today, I knew that there were some people who secretly called me crazy or "ghost girl."

Nowadays, I had learned to be a bit more tactful and keep my secret a secret. I acted like a goodie goodie honors student so nobody could complain anymore.

I guess my mom and dad weren't the only ones who had twisted me.

I sometimes wondered whether these monsters that showed up when I tried to escape from the normal world were actually real.

Maybe it was all just my imagination running wild.

But it didn't matter.

Right now, I just wanted to go away somewhere.

It was just as Tama-chan had said.

I wanted to go somewhere where I could flap my wings freely without my mom's voice constantly ringing in my ears.

I was just a bit tired of trying hard.

So, right now... just for now, I wouldn't.

-

"Nozomi-chan, come on."

-

Tama-chan beckoned me over from her position on my windowsill.

Keeping an eye on the door while my mom kept on knocking on it (the door wasn't even locked - why didn't she just come in?), I walked quickly towards Tama-chan.

When I got right next to her, I still didn't have any idea what to do, but Tama-chan wrapped her arms around me.

"Got you~~~!"

I felt a shiver run up my spine. For a second I felt like I was about to be eaten.

I buried my face into Tama-chan's soft bosom.

It was so warm.

It was like I was snuggled up next to the sun.

"Here we go. If it gets too late Tsurugi-nee is going to get mad at me, so we'll only leave for a bit, 'kay?"

Tama-chan smiled, and then fell backwards.

We were on the second floor.

There was nothing behind Tama but the night sky.

"Fwah...?!"

Surprised, I let out a weird squeal.

I felt myself falling down, still held in Tama-chan's arms.

I should've hit the ground by now, but no matter how much time passed this sensation of weightlessness never ceased.

I frantically looked around me, and saw that I was now floating through space.

Countless stars twinkled around me, and the darkness seemed to stretch endlessly on all sides.

"I'm sorry, Nozomi-chan."

Seeing me cower in fear, Tama-chan took the opportunity to nestle her face into the top of my head and nibble on my hair, doing whatever she wished.

"Tsurugi-nee warned me already... everything is Tama's fault."

Tama's voice was filled with regret, something I had never expected to hear from her.

"Tama, you see, Tama was jealous of Kagami-nee, and wanted a normal friend. Tama is a god, so if she wanted, anybody would like her, right? So Tama couldn't tell. Did Tama just order you to be her friend without knowing it? Or did you really want to be Tama's friend? Tama couldn't tell... and Tama was always scared."

As always, Tama-chan was going on and on about something I could neither make heads nor tails of.

But... I guess Tama-chan also had her own things to worry about.

Knowing that, I felt just a bit closer to her.

"But, Nozomi-chan was just a bit different. She was *just like Tama* and could fight against alterations just a little bit. So Tama was so happy and thought she could finally find a normal friend. So Tama went up to you and tried to protect you, but that just made all the other gods jealous..."

Tears leaked out of Tama's eyes.

"Tama wanted to protect you, but like Kagami-nee, she couldn't do it too well, and so Tama thought Nozomi-chan might get spirited away and eaten. That's why Tama has to get away from you... we can't ever be friends. Tama was being selfish. So, Tama will grant Nozomi-chan's last wish and then go away."

I wanted to say something at seeing Tama-chan getting so sad, but nothing came out.

I had studied a lot of things up until this day.

But I didn't have the slightest clue what to do, what to feel in this situation.

I was the one who had been the idiot.

"You..."

Those were my true thoughts.

"You aren't my friend."

I had a loud, stupid classmate who never made any sense.

She was a strange creature, and I had no idea why she had become mixed in with my life.

Tama-chan, trust me... you haven't had much of an effect on my life at all.

So, please, Tama-chan.

A truly good girl like you shouldn't ever be apologizing to someone like me.

☆☆☆

The feeling of weightlessness suddenly stopped.

When I looked around, I found myself in a strange world.

It clearly was not Earth.

The sky was painted a dull silver, while countless stars and what looked like five moons glittered above.

The ground was also silver-colored, and from it sprouted many buildings that looked like they were made of emerald crystal.

I was completely bewildered.

"Umm, so, umm."

Tama took me by the hand and began to walk, looking like she was used to this place.

"So, Tama became friends with these aliens, and was invited over to play many times... but this is the farthest place Tama knows, so that's why Tama brought you here."

"A-Aliens?"

I pinched myself on the cheek thinking this might all be a dream. Nope, the pinch definitely hurt.

"Don't get too far from Tama, okay? The air here is really weird, so you won't be able to breathe. And then you might die. Ah, it's Kyupii-chan."

Tama mumbled some terrifying things before raising a hand in the air.

Taking a closer look, I saw a table set right next to the emerald city. The table itself stood out like a sore thumb and was occupied by a surprisingly handsome man.

"Kyupii-chan is the prince of this planet."

Tama-chan casually explained that to me, but my mind was in disarray.

Kyupii-chan (the Le Petit Prince who looked nothing like anything I would ever call "Kyupii-chan") gave us a smile and a strange, cheerful greeting.

"BoNjOuR!"

Why French?

"It'S bEeN sO lOnG, tAmA-cHaN! YoU nEvEr CoMe To PlAy AnYmOrE, sO i'Ve BeEn So LoNeLy! Is ThAt YoUr FrIeNd OvEr ThErE?"

He looked at me, and I looked down in fear.

Rather than an alien, he looked more like just a suspicious foreigner. Tama-chan explained for me.

"This is Nozomi-chan. She's Tama's friend... or she was."

Tama-chan looked sad, and the alien cocked his head to the side in confusion, but in the meantime offered us two seats.

"Also, Kyupii-chan, why do you look human now?"

"AhH, wE iNhAbItAnTs Of ThIs PlAnEt WeRe So FoCuSeD oN InTeLIeCtUAl DeVeLoPmEnT tHaT oUr BoDiEs GrEw WeAk In ThE pRoCeSs. ThAt'S wHy We CoUlDn'T PrOpErLy DeFeNd OuRsElVeS aGaInSt ThE bRuTiSh EaRtHlInGs WhEn ThEy AtTaCkEd Us. ThAt AtTaCk AlSo Is WhY wE cHoSe To ImItAtE tHe HuMaN bOdY, sO wE cAn At LeAsT BeGiN tO gAiN bAcK a BiT oF tHe PhYsIcAl StReNgTh We HaD lOsT."

Kyupii-chan went on about something I didn't understand before waving his hand grandly back and forth.

"Is This Imitation Good? IT's Good, Right?"

"Yeah. Kyupi-chan looks really cool. Right, Nozomi-chan?"

Don't look at me please.

"Hearing that pleases Me. It fills me with joy To know That Tama Likes this new Form Of Mine."

Did this alien have a crush on Tama or something?

I blushed a bit as my female intuition filled my head with thoughts, and in order to hide my embarrassment I took a sip of the green tea looking drink that Kyupii-chan had brought me, but it had such an extreme taste that I spit it out.

"Pfuu?!"

"OhH, do you Not like it?! we cultivated earth Plants With the highest Nutritional value And Ground theM into powder before dissolving that powder in water! It Should Be Quite to your liking!"

"That's just aojiru! That disgusting vegetable drink! Nobody likes aojiru! It's the worst!"

"aHaHaHa! aHaHaHaHaHa!"

"Why are you laughing?! You almost sound American like that!"<sup>1</sup>

"Tama-chan is glad to see Nozomi-chan having so much fun~."

Tama-chan just drank her aojiru like it was a normal drink. She seemed to have completely missed the point.

After that, I accompanied these two strange creatures as they practiced another strange earth custom by giving me a grand tour of the planet.

It's a bit frustrating for me to say this, but looking around on this planet was way more fun and interesting than studying.

☆☆☆

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<sup>1</sup> Far be it for me to claim knowledge of Japanese stereotypes on what Americans act like.

I woke up the next day, feeling as if I had had a strange dream.

Although I didn't know how much of it had actually been a dream.

According to my parents, they had found me asleep at my study desk. My dad started saying how he felt bad about having me study so much that I got so exhausted like that, but then my mom started arguing with him. Now I had a headache this early in the morning.

Usually, I'd pretend to just ignore them, bottling up all this stress inside of me.

But for some reason, I felt incredibly lonely right now.

It was like I had said goodbye to somebody precious to me.

So, like a real child, I started bawling my eyes out when I saw my parents arguing like that.



After that, my mom and dad got really flustered and tried to calm me down, and eventually we ended up going to an amusement park as a family.

It was a weekday too.

Going to an amusement park today wasn't actually that fun. My mom was trying way too hard to be nice, and my dad was trying way too hard to be considerate, and I also had to push down the guilt I felt for skipping school.

Don't get me wrong: it wasn't bad either.

In the car ride back home, I mumbled in my head the words I couldn't say out loud.

Hey, this is a secret, okay?

I didn't have much fun today, but that's because last night I was taken to a place that was much, much more absurd than an amusement park.

It really wasn't because I hated my parents or anything.



During the car ride back home, we ended up passing by the side of the park.

I decided to act a bit selfish and asked my dad to stop the car.

As usual, my classmates were playing soccer in the park, and in the middle of that throng of people was Tama-chan, her beauty still as bright as the sun.

I walked straight towards them, when Satou called out to me, a bit startled.

"Ah! Nozomi! What happened to school today? It's rare to see you taking a day off."

"It's a secret."

I bluntly evaded the question and walked up to Tama-chan, who looked a bit at a loss.

She was as big as always, and I looked up at her with a hint of challenge in my eyes.

"U-Umm, Nozomi-chan."

Tama-can looked a bit nervous, and her pretty eyes set themselves on me.

"It's dangerous to be with Tama, remember? Tama already said that yesterday, remember?"

"Sure, it might be dangerous."

I could be stubborn if I wanted to. Please don't take me for an idiot.

"But Tama-chan will just protect me, right?"

"Tama is stupid though, so Tama will fail a lot."

She looked like an adult, but she was younger, more fragile, and less dependable than any kid I knew.

Even then, she made everyone around her smile, and always acted so cheerful...

She was a kind and warm person, and that's why I liked her.

She was trying to distance herself from me, to ignore her desire to be friends with me, just so she could protect me.

I couldn't just leave such a strong but foolish person behind.

"When you fail, I'll be there to help."

My parents had lost their faith in each other, and now they spent every waking minute fighting.

They had loved each other once, but their hearts were filled with nothing but doubt and their lives filled with pain.

I was their daughter... but that's precisely why I should strive not to make the same mistakes.

"I don't really understand this kind of stuff... but we're friends now."

I awkwardly but desperately asserted that.

"We're friends, right?"

I held out my hand, and Tama-chan took it in her own, her smile as bright as the sun.

I spent the rest of the day playing soccer with everyone, under the watchful gazes of my mom and dad.

☆☆☆

I had just one big secret.

I had lived my life by escaping from reality, and worrying about - or maybe clinging to - the shred of uniqueness I found at the end of that escape. It was what made me different from everyone else.

But, I was a child who knew nothing.

I was an idiot for living this long and trying to deal with anything and everything by myself.

Strange monsters were lurking in the alleyways around town.

There was also a strange girl who had bunny ears coming from the top of her head.

Even though it was winter, there was a river in town where frogs would come out and play at night.

And at the end of the universe lay an emerald city inhabited by a prince.

There was a somewhat stupid god attending school in my class.

Actually turning off your brain once in a while and playing around in the park was pretty fun.

And living a happy life was no harder than learning to trust your feelings and hanging out with your friends.

I was an idiot.

I just didn't know.

But there were many, many secrets lying hidden in this world.

### Afterword

Good afternoon. This is Akira.

I'm happy to bring you the third volume of this (not really) slice of life tale of Japanese mythology (?), Sasami-san@Ganbaranai. This time I went with the same, established 3-part structure that you might be used to, but the third part had a different narrator so I made it a "Special Story" instead.

Anyways, here are my usual comments.

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@ With Regards to the "God's-Eye View"// After this book, Sasami-san loses the Power of the Supreme God (well, rather, she entrusts it to someone else), so I took this opportunity to at least give her one chance to use those powers selfishly and for her own gain.

The Power of the Supreme God can warp time and space, and change the very laws of physics. In this volume, Sasami-san was in the "God's-Eye View" position, from where she could look down and see everything and directly meddle with the world, almost like a writer reorganizing a story.

I had casually written during volume one that altering history was even possible with the Power of the Supreme God, but this time I wrote a bit about what might actually happen if it came to that. In any case, the conclusions that Sasami-san came to in this volume basically represents what this series thinks about changing the past, but because the *possibility* exists, there will also be evil organizations like the exciting band of chuunibyou-<sup>1</sup>... err, I mean the sinister occult society Arahabaki who might try to use that ability to warp time and space and history itself for its own gain.

By the way, if you do an Internet search for "Arahabaki," you might figure out the true identities of everyone in that organization, so if you don't like spoilers please be careful.

Also, I don't think this was made clear in the book, but Arahabaki is precisely the evil organization that made Kagami. They will be central to the story in later volumes.

But anyways, the main story in this volume was a bit too crazy, so I wrote a special story with a life-sized, "normal" girl Nozomi-chan as a narrator, to bring us all back down firmly to earth.

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@Next, the acknowledgements section// There were around a hundred pages of unusable material that we had to cut from this volume, but my editor Hoshino-san never lost heart and edited everything.

---

<sup>1</sup> Slang term for "eighth-grade-syndrome."

Also, I'd like to thank Hidari-san, who drew these beautiful illustrations that give color to this world, and honestly moved me down to my very soul. I'd also like to thank everyone who was involved with this work.

And lastly, I'd like to thank all my readers. With this volume, it feels like we've concluded one arc of this story, and next time we will be starting Sasami-san's second year in school. And with a rival character (Edogawa Jou) making her appearance, I hope you will agree that there is plenty to look forward to.

Well then, let's try our very best next time as well.

- Akira

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